

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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VOLUME
20





“No wonder
you need guards
watching over you!
It wouldn’t be
surprising at all for
outsiders who aren’t
afraid of us people of
the forest’s edge to
get some foul ideas
at the sight of all
those coins!”

It was such a haul that
it would be difficult to lift
without subdividing it, so
naturally the women who
were working with us for
the first time today were
stunned when they saw
the scale of our earnings.



"Whoa, what a strange feeling! It's like we're out in the forest when it's turning dark."

"Ooh, what's that bird?! How strange!"

"Welcome, everyone from the forest's edge."

The sun god's revival festival
In the Gamley Troupe's Tent

A man with a red turban and a large brown beard is performing a fire magic show. He is wearing a red cloth draped over his shoulder and a gold necklace with large, teardrop-shaped pendants. He has a gold bracelet on his right wrist and a gold chain around his waist. He is holding a small flame in his right hand. The background is a bright, fiery orange and yellow.

Gamley gave
an affected
bow our way.

“Well then,
dear guests,
please watch
carefully as I,
the leader of
the Gamley
Troupe, put
on a show
for you.”

MENU

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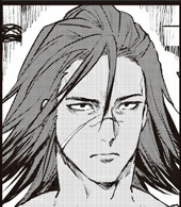


Character Introductions



~ People of the Forest's Edge ~

	Asuta Tsurumi A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power led him to another world.		Ai Fa The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.
	Donda Ruu The head of the Ruu clan, and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter. He injured his right shoulder in the battle with the lord of the forest.		Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Darmu Ruu The second son of the main Ruu house. He can be curt and rough at times, and is emotional in general. He injured the palm of his right hand in the battle with the lord of the forest.		Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.
	Vina Ruu The eldest daughter of the main Ruu house. A peerless seductive beauty. She's been left wavering after Shumiral confessed his love to her.		Reina Ruu The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls.
	Lala Ruu The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings for Shin Ruu.		Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making sweets. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.
	Shin Ruu The eldest son and young clan head of a Ruu branch house. He blames himself for the incident in which Asuta was kidnapped, and after much training in the aftermath, he became one of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Sheera Ruu The eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house, and Shin Ruu's older sister. She has a mild-mannered personality and has hidden feelings for Darmu Ruu.
	Gazraan Rutim The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also a friend without equal to Asuta. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Dan Rutim The former head of the Rutim clan. He possesses uncommon strength as a hunter, but is currently recovering from an injury to his left leg.

	Rau Lea The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Toor Deen Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business. Her skills at making sweets are blossoming.
	Lem Dom The younger sister of the head of the Dom clan. Because she wishes to be a hunter, she has left home and is currently living in a vacant house near the Fa clan.		Deek Dom The head of the main Dom house. An exceedingly skilled hunter despite his young age. Quiet and single-minded by nature.
Giran Ririn The head of the Ririn clan. Despite his gentle manner and appearance, he's an extremely skilled hunter. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Ji Maam The eldest son of the Maam clan head. Has an exceptionally formidable build, even among the hunters under the Ruu.	

~ Townsfolk ~

	Mikel A former chef from the castle town. Due to a crippling injury inflicted on his right hand, he lost his ability to cook professionally. Currently, he lives as a charcoal seller in the Turan lands.		Myme Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she has put a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills. Deeply moved by Asuta's cooking, she is experimenting with giba meat on her own.
	Arishuna Zi Mafraluda A fortune teller of eastern heritage. Currently, she is staying in the castle town as a guest of Duke Genos.		Yumi The daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Sixteen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who took issue with the people of the forest's edge.
	Milano Mas The owner of an inn called The Kimyuus's Tail. A stubborn man with a strong sense of duty. Though he has had issues with the people of the forest's edge, they have been cleared up over time, and he has become a strong supporter of Asuta's.		Tara Dora's daughter. Eight years old. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is around her age.
Telia Mas Milano Mas's daughter. Though she used to be afraid of the people of the forest's edge, she has been opening up bit by bit thanks to her interactions with Asuta and the others.		Dora A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town. Though he once feared the people of the forest's edge, he has since become a strong supporter of Asuta's.	
Yang The head chef of the house of Daleim. Currently, he is working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.		Nicola A maid employed by the house of Daleim. Alongside Sheila, she assists Yang in his work. In the past, she used to be the second daughter of the house of Viscount Alphan.	
Bozl A southerner who is one of the apprentices of the chef Varkas in the castle town. A large man with a friendly personality.			

~ Group Performance ~

	Shumiral An easterner who is the head of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase. After confessing his love to Vina Ruu, he left to travel on business for half a year.		Radajid An easterner who is the second in command of the merchant group known as the Silver Vase. Shumiral's right hand man. He is over 190 centimeters tall.
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Chapter 1: Preparations for the Revival Festival

1

After the festival of the hunt at the Ruu settlement, there was a day off, and then the sixteenth of the violet month arrived. Starting today, the Fa clan would begin running an outdoor restaurant of its own.

It had already been around twenty days since the Ruu clan opened their outdoor restaurant. And with just six days left till the sun god's revival festival, our preparations were complete as well.

Prior to this, the outdoor restaurant had been using four stall spaces with seven tables and forty-two chairs. The plan was for the Fa clan to make an investment to provide the same amount of seating. In other words, from here on out, our two clans would be running an outdoor restaurant that was twice as large together.

"All right, now we've just gotta wait for the food to heat up."

We had set up everything for the new expanded seating yesterday on our day off. We had simply needed to clean off the tables and chairs this morning, and then were able to start our final prep work at the stalls themselves.

I had also increased the number of my stalls from two to three, starting today. Since we had invested in the outdoor restaurant, I was now able to serve dishes that required customers to have a seat and utensils. I had decided to alternate between the old giba manju and poitan wraps at one stall, and unveil new dishes at the other two stalls.

For one of them, I went with both curry and pasta. I had incorporated some of what I had learned from Naudis into the curry. And as for the pasta, I hoped it would draw attention because it was so novel.

Still, even if the curry and pasta were dishes I felt proud of, I couldn't really call them proper "giba cooking." Put simply, it would be completely possible to

make delicious versions of the dishes with kimyuus or karon meat. That meant they neglected the crucial point of helping to spread the delicious taste of giba meat. Because of that, I decided to sell them alternating day by day at the same stall, alongside a separate meat dish as a daily special.

For our opening day, that meant selling giba curry, giba manju, and the special dish, giba steak. It would soon be half a year since I had started doing business in the post town, and I had finally made up my mind to try selling the meat in the style that would allow the customer to most directly enjoy its taste.

The flavor of giba steak was pretty quirky, compared to kimyuus or karon, so I had no clue how well it would be accepted by the townsfolk. But by treating it as one of the specials, I could test that out. And if it drew enough interest, I intended to also give whole roast giba a try in the post town.

With all that expansion going on, it seemed like it would be difficult to keep doing the lottery for the giba cutlet sandwiches, so for the moment the plan was to give that gimmick a rest and instead add the dish to the list of specials.

“With you guys expanding your stalls so much, it’s really starting to feel like a festival is coming. I’m gonna enjoy seeing everything you’ve got for us to eat now,” a customer from Jagar who was standing in line remarked.

“You can give the new dishes a taste test, so please do try them all. The giba curry over there uses lots of herbs from Sym, but it’s actually a dish from my home country.”

“Hmm? I’m not exactly fond of Sym, but I guess if I can try a sample first, I’ll at least give it a shot.”

When unveiling my new menu, I was the most concerned about my customers from Jagar.

Folks from Sym tended not to be too concerned about quirky meat due to eating gyama raised in the mountains, which had a strong scent to them, and they generally didn’t have any issues with ingredients from Jagar either. Meanwhile, southerners were often really direct by nature and held a strong antipathy toward Sym, not to mention a lot of them were a bit pickier than even westerners when it came to the taste of meat. With that in mind, I added a highly aromatic tau oil and myamuu sauce to the giba steak.

For garnishes, I prepared a sauté of aria, nenon, and the pseudo-brown beech mushroom. I kept the meat at just around 120 grams and sold it for two red coins. I chose that size and price because I wanted to allow people to enjoy all sorts of combinations of cooking from the stalls.

With the other new dish—the giba curry—I chose to go with the same system the Ruu clan did with their soups. In other words, one ladleful was one and a half red coins, and two ladles would be three.

Just like the Ruu clan did, though, I referred to the half size as a whole portion. Tsuvai had advised us that if an overwhelming majority of the customers ordered the smaller size, we should treat that as the baseline. As such, one ladleful became a full serving, and if that wasn't enough, people could order a double serving.

Furthermore, the soup, curry, and specials came with a half-sized baked poitan. Half a poitan wasn't very much food, so I still expected folks would order another dish alongside them.

The Ruu clan also had a change on their end too. Which is to say, they reevaluated the size and cost of the giba burgers and myamuu giba that they alternated between. Up until now, both had used quite a bit of meat, around 180 grams, and sold for three red coins. That price-quantity ratio was determined by the castle of Genos, and so there was no changing it. But it would be difficult to enjoy alongside other dishes like that, so they went ahead and lowered both the price and volume.

The giba burgers and giba manju both had 120 grams of meat for two red coins, while the myamuu giba and poitan wraps were 90 grams of meat for one and a half coins.

I was worried that making the giba burgers smaller would change how substantial they felt but ultimately decided that size wouldn't be an issue after all. Besides, using 180 grams of meat was rather non-standard to begin with.

It was a pretty distant memory at this point, but the patties at a certain famous burger restaurant from my old world weighed in at just 30-40 grams. At some point, they started selling a burger that had more volume to it, with a patty that weighed a quarter of a pound. When I did the math out of curiosity, it

worked out to about 113 grams. In other words, even after needing to downsize them, the giba burgers were still bigger than a quarter pound of meat.

Another important point was that we decided to stagger the alternation for some of the dishes. That was because if everything was swapping daily, there wouldn't be as much depth to the variety of combinations on offer.

The Fa clan's specials and the Ruu's soup dishes were set to rotate daily. The Fa clan would switch between the giba curry and the pasta every two days, while the Ruu would do the same for their giba burgers and myamuu giba every three days. Our giba manju and poitan wraps would change out every four days. It was about half a month between now and the end of the revival festival, so customers with a long stay would be able to enjoy all sorts of combinations.

As for the number of meals, we didn't know which dishes would prove most popular, so for today we prepared a lot of everything. We'd play it by ear and make adjustments from here on based on the sales.

For today, we had three hundred servings of giba hot pot stew, two hundred of giba curry, one hundred and forty of the myamuu giba, one hundred and twenty giba manju, and one hundred giba steaks.

If we sold all of that, it would work out to 1,400 red coins. So far, our sales had maxed out at around 1,150 coins, and today would be a test to see just how much we could expand.

If we end up with a lot of leftovers, the Kimyuus's Tail should purchase them off of us...but I wouldn't want to trouble Milano Mas like that if I can help it.

Of course, expanding the stalls and restaurant also meant bringing more people onboard to help. Up until now, our full-time team had consisted of me, Toor Deen, and Yamiru Lea, while Yun Sudra came around the time the sun hit its peak. But from here on out, we would all be working for the entire business day, and we were bringing in two more chefs. They came from the Gaaz and Ratsu clans, who had previously expressed their support for the Fa clan's actions and had women to spare.

As for the Ruu clan, Reina and Sheera Ruu alternated daily, and Vina, Lala, and Rimee Ruu had a three-day rotation, with only Tsuvai working every day. That was all kept the same, while Ama Min Rutim switched from only arriving when

the sun hit its peak to being full-time, and they also took in newcomers from their subordinate clans, the Lea and Min. The idea was to bring on new help before the busy period arrived, just as we had done.

That was the plan for the sun god's revival festival that the members of the Ruu clan and I had put together.

"Hey there, Asuta. Did I get here a bit too soon?" a voice called out from off to my side while I was heating up a metal tray in the stall. It was Dora and Tara, who we had just passed by on the way here.

"Wow, you showed up early. We'll need just a bit more time before opening."

They usually didn't show up until the morning rush had died down, at the earliest. Placing a hand atop his beloved daughter's head, Dora shot me a strained smile.

"Well, I asked the pot seller's son to watch the shop so I could hurry over. He wanted to come as soon as possible too."

"Oh, is that so? I feel like I should apologize to you. You're gonna be wasting even more time with us now that we're operating as a sit-in restaurant."

"What are you saying? If it means there's even more delicious food for us to eat, then any extra hassle is worth it," Dora said as he glanced around. "Still, this is quite a sight to see. Back when you started out, I never would have imagined your business would get this big."

There were now five stalls in a row lined up selling giba meat. And beyond that were eight stalls' worth of space dedicated to the outdoor restaurant's seating.

The number of people working here had grown from eight to twelve. Things really had expanded an awful lot compared to when it was just me and Vina Ruu starting out, selling a mere ten giba burgers a day. The thought was starting to make me kinda emotional.

"Yumi and that Myme girl will be opening stalls soon too, right? Then things will get even more lively."

"Ah, Myme's set to open up shop today. She's going to be using that open

space over there once she arrives.”

Since we wouldn’t be able to talk with each other if our seating was between us and her, yesterday we shifted our whole setup in order to make space for two more stalls next to us. Myme and The Westerly Wind would be setting up their stalls there, while The Great Southern Tree would supposedly set up shop further south, where things were more lively. The Kimyuus’s Tail was just supervising the stalls for now.

“Things are completely open across the road, though. From what I hear, something big will be going in there,” I said.

“Yeah, last year a group of traveling performers put up a huge circus tent for the revival festival. They seemed to pull in quite a bit of business, so it could be the same group doing that again,” Dora explained.

“Huh?! Those guys are coming to Genos again?! I really want to see them with Rimee Ruu!” Tara said, her eyes sparkling as she tugged on her father’s arm.

“So there are performers coming? And you saw them last year, Tara?” I asked.

“Yeah! It was a little scary, but also really fun! There were animals I’d never seen before, and I just loved it!”

“I see. Animals you’d never seen before, huh?”

Karon and kimyuus had been brand new sights for me, but she must have been talking about animals that were even more unusual if they were supposedly that much of a spectacle. Back in my own world, circuses would bring along animals like elephants, giraffes, and lions.

While I was thinking about that, Dora gave a troubled, “Hmm... I’m not too fond of tents like that. Still, I can at least appreciate the lovely young women.”

“Ah ha ha. It certainly does sound like a good time. I’d love to go along too, as long as my clan head gives her permission.”

“And I’d feel a lot more comfortable if you all went along. Those guys aren’t such bad folks, but there are a lot of shady traveling performers out there.” After saying that, Dora’s eyes opened wide. He seemed to have noticed the non-chef part of our group standing behind the stalls. “Huh? So you’re here

too? It's been a while, um..."

"My name is Dan Rutim! You're the vegetable seller from the Daleim lands, aren't you? I'm glad to see you looking well!"

Yes, we once again had hunters come along to act as guards. From what I had heard, you needed to be extra cautious during the revival festival, as lowlifes from other towns would sometimes come wandering in. It truly was fortunate that the Ruu clan's break period overlapped with the revival festival.

As he peeked his face out from behind Dan Rutim, Ludo Ruu casually greeted them. "Hey! If it isn't Dora and little Tara. So you showed up before opening?"

Tara's face instantly lit up. "Yay! You all came to town too, Ludo Ruu?!"

"Yeah, 'cuz the Ruu clan is in a break period. The men'll be taking turns coming into town each day from here on out."

We would be having a random assortment of five to six hunters accompany us as guards. For today that meant the two of them, plus Ai Fa, Rau Lea, and the second son of the main Rutim house.

This was the first time since things got complicated with Cyclaeus that we had guards come along to the stalls. Back then we had gone with young hunters who had gentle appearances so as not to frighten the townsfolk, but we did away with that requirement this time around.

There were two reasons for that. Back when I was kidnapped by Lefreya, brawny hunters came to the post town en masse, so the townsfolk had built up something of a resistance to them. And I also suggested to Donda Ruu that it would be good to try to see how the relationship between the men of the forest's edge and the post town was shifting.

Furthermore, for better or worse, people from elsewhere didn't have much fear of the people of the forest's edge, so it was decided that fierce-looking hunters would act as a better deterrent.

The reason we ended up with so many familiar guards today was because it was the men with the strongest sense of curiosity, like Dan Rutim and Ludo Ruu, who were the first to volunteer, but we were scheduled to have men from the other subordinate clans like the Maam, Muufa, and Ririn help out too.

“Hey Ludo Ruu, is Rimee Ruu on duty today?” Tara questioned.

“Yeah.” Ludo Ruu nodded back. “She’s working over there. And she’s been itching to see you again.”

“Hooray! I’m so happy I get to see both of you at once!” Tara said with an earnest smile, and Ludo Ruu flashed the whites of his teeth back at her. Ever since Tara’s visit to the forest’s edge, the bond between them had grown steadily deeper.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt when you’re having a good time chatting, but when is the food gonna be ready?” the customer from Jagar chimed in, looking rather impatient. He must have been getting annoyed because I had only warmed up the tray but hadn’t done anything further.

“Ah, sorry. I’m waiting for the preparations for the other dishes to be ready. If I started serving people on my own, I’d probably have the whole crowd lining up in front of me.”

I was in charge of the special dish, the giba steak. Looking to either side, I was met by nods from Yamiru Lea at the giba manju stall and Toor Deen at the giba curry stall.

The Gaaz woman was beside Toor Deen, while the Ratsu woman was standing by in the outdoor restaurant alongside Yun Sudra. Sheera and Rimee Ruu were set to show them the ropes over there.

Over past the giba curry stall, Ama Min Rutim waved at us from her post where she was handling the giba hot pot stew. Tsuvai offered no reaction from the myamuu giba stall, but as long as she had her tray warmed up, there wouldn’t be any issues in terms of preparations.

“Okay, that’s all of us ready to start, so we’ll go ahead and open up for business. This dish is being unveiled for the first time, so you can give it a taste test if you want,” I said, pulling out a leather bag of fatty sirloin meat we had prepared for this dish. After tenderizing it to deal with the fibers, the meat was roughly one and a half centimeters thick.

I brushed off the pico leaves used to preserve the slab of meat, then placed it atop the pan, and the fat started crackling right away. There was a strong

aroma of curry in the air, but the closest customers would definitely smell the meat grilling.

After I checked the color on the bottom, I flipped it over, then pulled out my secret weapon: a domed metal steak cover. I was using a pot lid that I had purchased through Diel's metalworking group.

After pouring fruit wine over the cooked surface, I sealed the sirloin under the steak cover. Cooking it with a cover was meant to shorten the overall time it took to grill. The smell of grilling meat and sweet fruit wine mingled together, growing even more potent.

Once a minute or so had passed, I removed the lid, then cut into the center of the meat and found it had been properly heated through. I started slicing it into roughly one-centimeter-thick pieces and moved them onto a large wooden plate, quickly pouring the tau oil and myamuu sauce over the top before stabbing them with some wooden skewers I had purchased from a craftsman.



“These are free, so please go ahead and take one. Just return the skewers once you’re done with your taste test.”

Instantly, a number of arms reached out. As I prepared more samples and prayed that this would swiftly lead to some orders, I laid out a number of slabs of meat atop the tray.

“Ooh, this is delicious!” a rather gruff-looking customer from the west proclaimed before anyone else. “Not that it’s a surprise, but kimyuus and karon leg meat just can’t compete. Hey, how much does this cost?”

“For this size with vegetables on the side, it’s two red coins. And each meal also comes with a half-sized baked poitan.”

“Hmm, two red coins for that, eh...? Doesn’t sound bad, but I wanna fill myself up more.”

“If you wish, I can add another half cut of meat for three coins total. But we’ve got all kinds of soup here, and we recommend trying them together.”

“Oh right, those soups sell for one and a half red coins. Add that to one of these, and it’s three and a half red coins, huh? All right, let’s go with that!”

“Thank you. Please hold on just a moment.”

Once the first customer had made up his mind, the other customers started flooding in. The concept of samples hadn’t been much of a thing in Genos before, so folks just wanted to fill their stomachs as quickly as possible. At this rate, it was possible that I wouldn’t need the samples at all for the time being.

“Asuta, could I get an order here too? Hmm... Is the only other new dish you have today that spicy-looking one?” Dora asked, pointing at the giba curry stall.

“That’s right,” I replied with a smile.

“Okay, then if we could each get a portion of soup as well, that should be good enough. I’m really looking forward to this.”

Dora added an order of both the curry and the steak to that, which he split with Tara. It really was charming to watch.

I also took out a leather bag full of sautéed vegetables and poured them out

along the edge of my cooking tray. I had already fully prepared them back at the house, so they just needed to be heated back up.

Then I loaded the grilled steak and sautéed vegetables onto a series of plates alongside the baked poitan, one after another. Since this dish took a bit more effort to finalize than the others, the line ended up longer than for the giba manju and giba curry, making things quite busy for me.

As I worked, Dan Rutim leaned forward close to me. “Asuta, I’m getting hungry myself, so when can I eat?”

“Huh? Um, I can make you a snack, of course, but could you wait until I handle this line?”

“What?! Such cruelty, making me wait with such a delicious aroma in the air!”

Regardless, the morning rush would settle down in thirty minutes or so. I just needed him to hold out till then.

Hmm. We have more stalls than the Ruu, so it’s a bit tough even with these numbers. Maybe it’ll be different once the two newcomers get used to the job, but if things get any busier, we may need to bring in even more employees. In which case, it would probably be best to train them now too. The Fou and Ran had said they would have a difficult time letting us hire any of their women, which would leave the Liddo, who had ties to the Deen. Or perhaps it might make sense to send a proposal to the Beim and Dagora.

The Beim and Dagora were clans who stood in opposition to the Fa clan doing business in the post town. But the Zaza were the head of the opposition faction, and yet they let a member of their subordinate Deen clan, Toor Deen, work with me in order to better understand the situation. Maybe it would be possible to persuade the Beim and Dagora in the same way.

“You certainly seem busy, Asuta...” someone said to me out of nowhere.

“Gah, you scared me there! What do you want, Ai Fa?”

“Is that any way to respond when your clan head is trying to show her appreciation?”

Rimee Ruu had pulled Ai Fa away, and they had been hanging out together in

the outdoor restaurant. But my clan head must have been freed up when things got busy over there too.

Ai Fa had injured her ribs in the battle against the lord of the forest and was currently taking a break from her hunting work. Even so, she insisted that she could take down any townspeople who tried to cause trouble regardless, and had volunteered as a guard. With the expression on her face as gallant as ever, Ai Fa shot me a probing stare.

“Your stall seems the most shorthanded. Why aren’t you having the Gaaz or Ratsu women help?”

“Well, because the steak is a daily special. I don’t know when we’ll be serving it next, so it would be more helpful down the road to have them learn at the other stalls, right?”

“Hmm... So rather than this being a case of you haphazardly overburdening yourself, this is actually an arrangement you came up with after careful consideration?” Ai Fa remarked, and then she suddenly began removing her cloak, exposing the bandages wrapped around her abdomen. “In that case, I shall lend you a hand.”

“Huh? You’re saying you want to help run the stall, Ai Fa?”

“Indeed. There are four hunters here, aside from myself, which should be more than enough to act as guards. Besides, nothing seems to be particularly out of sorts in town today.”

It was pretty shocking for me to hear her make such a suggestion. But to be honest, I was so busy right now that I’d even be willing to ask a cat for help, so I certainly wouldn’t object if my wildcat of a clan head was offering her assistance.

“Well then, could you take the coins from the customers? That alone would be a big help.”

“Very well.” Ai Fa nodded, stowing her cloak in the stall and moving to stand next to me.

“The price is two red coins. You just put them here in this bag. This doesn’t happen very often, but if a customer pays with a white coin, they would get

eight red ones back as change.”

“Understood.”

Since I was cooking some more meat at the moment, Ai Fa had nothing to do yet as she stood there. The customers wouldn’t be able to spot her blade too easily like this, so as long as they didn’t take too much notice of her piercing gaze, she would make a fine saleswoman.

I never imagined the day would come when Ai Fa would help out with the business.

With a sense of joy welling up inside me, I continued to give my all to my work.

Perhaps it was an omen of what was to come during the revival festival, or maybe it was just the new menu drawing people’s attention, or it could even have been a consequence of having taken yesterday off, but at any rate, we were getting even more customers than usual crowding around the stalls.

2

“Hello! Looks like I’m really running behind!”

Myme arrived in the post town around thirty minutes after we opened for business.

By this point, we had managed to serve all the customers in the opening rush and the flow of new ones had finally started to slow down. Our hunter guards had gotten their snack too.

“Your restaurant really seems to be a success. You’ve got so many seats now, and they’re still all filled,” Myme noted.

“Fortunately, we’ve had a great flow of customers. Once the sun hits its peak, things will pick up again, and I’m sure your cooking will sell really well too.”

“Right! I don’t want the ingredients to go to waste, so I’m hoping I can sell out by the lower second hour,” Myme said, and I could see Bartha behind her holding the reins of the Ruu clan tolos, Jidura. In order to transport her supplies from her house in the Turan lands, Myme had needed to borrow not only a

guard but also a wagon. These were the tolos and wagon that had been bought for the clans under the Ruu to use, so once Bartha finished up her guard duty, the plan was to have her go around and buy whatever the clans needed before returning to the settlement.

The Fa clan was actually using the tolos and wagon bought for our local clans in a similar manner. After all, Gilulu and Ruuruu's wagons alone couldn't quite handle twelve chefs and five or six guards.

And just a trivial little aside, the local clans had decided to name their tolos Fafa. It was a sign of respect, as the massive bird had been a gift from the Fa clan.

Around the Fa clan we had Gilulu and Fafa, the Ruu had Ruuruu and Jidura, and the Rutim had Mim Cha. There were also tolos that I didn't know if they had a name or not, belonging to the Lea, Zaza, and Sauti clans, meaning there were currently eight of them living at the forest's edge.

"Well, I'm gonna go pick up my stall, so I'll see you later."

"Right. Take care."

Based on my recommendation, Myme was renting her stall from The Kimyuus's Tail as well. She had gotten acquainted with Telia Mas the other day when they both visited the forest's edge, and I would really be glad if that led to her making a connection with Milano Mas too.

I also couldn't help but wonder just what sort of giba dish Myme had come up with after all that preparation time. I knew I'd be impatiently looking forward to trying it for the rest of the day.

"So someone who isn't a person of the forest's edge is finally selling giba cooking," Ai Fa muttered from her position next to me. "Well, I suppose they've actually been selling it at the inns for a while now, but this is the first time I've personally seen it done. It's a rather strange feeling."

"Yeah. The inns have been serving tons of giba meat to the townsfolk in their dining halls for months, so it's nothing to be surprised about now. And besides, I've been selling it, and I look different from the rest of the people of the forest's edge myself."

“Even so, you are a full-fledged member of our people.”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t have to give me that scary look.”

That said, back when I first opened my stalls, I had folks ask questions like, “Why is someone who isn’t even a person of the forest’s edge selling giba meat, of all things?”

But at any rate, a natural-born citizen of Genos like Myme would now be selling giba cooking from a stall. This was surely another big step forward.

“Ooh, there certainly are a lot of giba dishes for sale,” a deep male voice said from directly in front of me. When I turned my head to face forward, I found a rather well-built customer from Jagar standing before the stall.

He was even larger than Aldas, the construction worker I had been acquainted with in the past. In terms of sheer body mass, he might have even been a match for Dan Rutim. His dark-brown hair and mustache were disheveled, he had a piercing look in his green eyes, and his expression appeared both calm and stern at the same time. A traveler’s cloak fully concealed his bulky frame.

“Welcome. They’ve cooled a good bit, but you can sample the meat atop that wooden plate for free,” I replied, only for the customer to simply give me a big enough smile that it made his eyes narrow.

At that, Ai Fa jabbed me with her elbow. “Asuta, he’s the man from that one time.”

“Hmm? Which man?”

She turned to address our customer. “My apologies, but I’ve completely forgotten your name as well.”

“Ah, think nothing of it. We’ve only met once, after all. And it can be difficult to tell people from other nations apart, so it’s no surprise that you wouldn’t remember, Sir Asuta.” He certainly was being polite. Folks from Jagar tended to be so frank and open that it was quite rare to hear them talk that way, aside from Diel’s attendant, Labis. “My name is Bozl. We met in the Turan manor in the castle town.”

“The Turan manor? Ah, then you’re...!”

“Yes, I am one of the apprentices of Chef Varkas. It’s been roughly a month since our last meeting, Sir Asuta.”

Varkas, the chef from the castle town, had two other apprentices in addition to Shilly Rou. One was a tall older man who looked to be an easterner, and the other was a large southerner. The latter of those two was Bozl here.

“I’m terribly sorry about that. What brings you to the post town?”

“I had some minor negotiations to do with a merchant from Jagar. Not all merchants have passes to the castle town, so I occasionally have to head out myself,” Bozl answered with a smile. “And since I had already come all this way, I decided I should see how your business is doing, Sir Asuta. But this is quite a surprise. I never imagined I would find such a large operation in the post town.”

“We actually just expanded the restaurant today. Also, half of it belongs to the Ruu clan from the forest’s edge.”

“Is that so? In that case, it seems I picked a good day to come,” Bozl remarked with a nod, staring down at the plate of samples. “So, this is giba meat? From what I can tell, it seems to be a rather straightforward dish.”

“That’s right. I just grill the giba meat on a metal tray and then add a sauce made with tau oil, myamuu, and a few other things. That’s all there is to it. If you’d like, please go ahead and give it a try.”

“I appreciate it. Ever since I tasted your cooking, I’ve been highly interested in giba meat.” Then, after saying “My thanks” with a western-style show of gratitude, he grabbed one of the small skewered bits of steak and tossed it into his mouth. Since I had gotten some orders in the meantime, I went ahead and grilled up some more meat. “This is delicious...” Bozl said with a beaming smile. “Thanks to how straightforward the dish is, I was able to appreciate the taste of the meat fully. Just what cut is this, exactly?”

“It’s back meat.”

“Back meat, is it? It seems a bit tougher than karon meat, but it has just the right amount of fat to it, and a powerful flavor. It seems with the meat of wild beasts, it naturally comes with both a characteristic scent and a strong taste

that can't be avoided."

"That's true. Is it to your liking?"

"Yes, very much so. If it were not forbidden by the castle, I would surely be making plans to buy up your giba meat myself."

Since we were still figuring out the appropriate market price for giba meat, it was forbidden for citizens of the castle town to purchase it. That was because Duke Marstein Genos had concerns that some noble may attempt to buy it all up and corner the market.

"My apologies, but I would like to sample the other dishes as well. That one there has a wonderful herby smell."

"Yeah. If at all possible, I'd love to have Varkas try that one someday too."

Varkas was incredibly skilled at handling herbs, so I couldn't help but wonder what his impression of my giba curry would be. It was something I had really wanted to know for a while now.

Bozl nodded and then headed off to the right toward the giba curry stall and those belonging to the Ruu clan. At the same time, I spotted Myme and Bartha returning with a stall. Perhaps because it was her first day doing business, Milano Mas was also with them.

"Okay, I'll be taking the spot next to you," Myme said with a smile as she started hurriedly setting up the stall. Part of that involved placing a large lidded pot over a flame. Maybe because the giba manju stall was between us, though, the smell of her dish didn't make it over to me.

"Hey Myme, how many portions did you prepare for today?" I loudly asked, with Yamiru Lea standing between us at the giba manju stall.

Myme sent me a smile back. "Well, since I'm just getting started today, I went ahead and prepared thirty meals."

"Huh?! Only thirty?!"

"That's right. From what I've heard, you're doing well if you can sell thirty to fifty meals in the post town, so I figured that would be about right for now."

That might have been true, but it was now normal for our giba dishes to sell

into the triple digits. Not that I had room to talk, considering I had started out with just ten meals in the past, but I still couldn't help but feel that such a small amount would sell out in a flash.

"I prepared three extra portions for you, someone from the Ruu clan, and the innkeeper to try, so please go ahead, if you'd like."

"I see. Thanks, that's good to hear," I replied, and then I turned the other way toward Toor Deen.

The young girl gave me a bashful smile while watching over the Gaaz woman as she worked. "I'll buy one of Myme's meals tomorrow or some other time."

"Sounds good. I'd like for everyone to have a chance to try it, so could you prepare ten or so extra meals tomorrow?" I asked Myme, but Bozl returned before I could get an answer.

"I sampled all of the dishes that I could, and every last one of them was delicious. I still have room left in my stomach, so I'm trying to figure out what I should order," he remarked with a smile, and then he brought his face close to mine with a serious look in his eyes. "That curry dish in particular...it was most splendid. Now I not only want to hear what Varkas has to say, but also Tatumai as well."

"Tatumai is Varkas's other apprentice, right? Was he born in Sym?"

"No, he was born in the west, but one of his parents supposedly had blood from the east." So in that case, he had mixed blood from the east and west, just like Sanjura. "Sir Asuta, if you do not mind, could I bring a serving of soup and that curry back to the castle town? It would allow me to fill my stomach fully with the other dishes as well. If that would be acceptable, I shall go purchase some lidded pots from a craftsman."

"Yeah, it should last till nighttime with no issue, so I have no problem with your plan. And I would be really glad if you could get the others' impressions too."

"Then I shall bring some back for Tatumai and Shilly Rou as well. It seems that Shilly Rou was dissatisfied with your sweet from the tea party the other day...but if she tries these dishes, it will surely have quite an impact on her,"

Bozl stated with the sort of wide grin I had come to expect from southerners. “As I recall, that morning was quite the ordeal. Varkas was in such a sulk over the fact that he could not attend the tea party due to work...”

“A sulk? Varkas was?”

“Indeed. He was like a child, asking why he couldn’t go rushing over there, to the place where you had been invited.” I had hardly seen Varkas’s expression shift at all, and my meager imagination wasn’t enough to picture what exactly the man would look like if he was sulking. “Well then, I shall finish up my work first and then return to purchase the meals once I’ve bought those containers. You wouldn’t expect any of the dishes to sell out in the next hour or so, would you?”

“No, I don’t imagine that will be an issue since we prepared a lot for today. But, well...” It must have been some twist of fate that I had met Bozl here today. After a bit of hesitation, I made up my mind to tell him about Myme. “Um, Bozl, do you know of a man named Mikel?”

“Mikel? Ah, he was considered to be one of the three great chefs several years back, alongside Varkas. I heard he had disappeared from Genos, though...”

“No, he actually moved from the castle town to the Turan lands. And his daughter is selling meals here in the post town starting today.”

“Oh?” Bozl remarked, his eyes opening wide. “Sir Asuta, are you close to Sir Mikel? The web of connections between people can be truly inexplicable at times...”

“Yeah, seriously,” I agreed, and then I pointed over toward the other side of the giba manju stall. “Mikel’s daughter’s stall is that one there. She didn’t prepare all that much, so how about giving it a try now while you have the chance?”

“Hmm...” Bozl pondered, stroking his disheveled mustache.

“On top of that, she uses giba meat too. And despite how young she is, I find her to be an exceptionally skilled chef.”

“Is that so? If that is your viewpoint, Sir Asuta, then I’m certain it must be

true,” Bozl replied with an amused smile. “I suppose I shall have to give it a taste before I leave. It being giba cooking is enough to draw my interest in and of itself.”

After watching Bozl walk over that way, I turned toward Ai Fa. “Sorry, Ai Fa, but if any customers come by, could you ask them to hold on for a bit? I’d like to try Myme’s dish before things get too crowded.”

“Yes, just leave it to me.”

Leaving my reliable clan head to hold down the stall, I called Sheera Ruu over from the outdoor restaurant, and we hurried over to Myme’s place.

The young girl greeted us with a bright smile. “Ah, Asuta. I just got the food heated up. This man placed an order just a moment ago as well.”

Bozl was in front of the stall wearing a nonchalant look. Since Myme wasn’t offering samples, he’d had no choice but to make a purchase. Meanwhile, Milano Mas was standing there next to the stall looking bored.

“I’ll go ahead and get things ready. That will be two red coins.”

“Right. Here you are.”

After accepting the coins from Bozl, Myme removed the lid from her pot. Instantly, a sweet smell spread through the air. It was the scent of karon milk.

Now that I thought back on it, during our trip to Dabagg, Myme had been struck by inspiration and had said she’d like to use karon milk in the recipe for her stall. That was why the stall’s opening had been delayed to today, right before the start of the revival festival.

Inside the large pot was a milky-white soup boiling away. It looked to have a thickness akin to a stew, and there were, of course, scents other than just the milk coming from it. It was a dense, sweet aroma.

Additionally, I could spy dozens of wooden skewers poking up from under the surface. Though I couldn’t see what the soup looked like under the surface, it was reminding me of oden.

“Please hold on for just a moment.”

She then pulled some baked poitan roughly twenty centimeters in diameter

from a bag and placed them on top of her work station. Next, she grabbed one of the wooden skewers and stirred it through the broth a bit before pulling it out. Apparently, the liquid was even more viscous than a stew, as the milky-white broth wrapped around the skewered bits like cheese fondue. However, now I could just about make out what she had on those skewers: giba meat, aria, and nenon.

The skewers alternated between three bits of meat and one of each of the vegetables, like what you'd see with a kabob. The vegetables were cut into round slices, while the meat was all rolled up.

Myme grabbed a baked poitan and sandwiched the skewered ingredients in the middle. Then, she gripped the poitan and pulled the skewer out. The result was a semi-circular dish that looked like a massive unsealed gyoza.

"Please, dig in," Myme said as she handed it to Bozl and then got to making the portion for us. Though she had to get her hand in close to the boiling contents of the pot, she didn't show any concern about the heat. She must have toughened up the skin of her hands through years of practice, just like I had. "Here's one for you too."

"Right. Thanks."

I started intensively inspecting the dish. Fuwano and poitan wrapped around meat and vegetables was a staple among the stalls. Nothing about it struck me as especially novel in terms of appearance or aroma. However, my expectations were still quite high as I bit into it.

The poitan was springy, yet also soft. Just dissolving the poitan in water and then baking it wouldn't give you this texture, so she must have mixed in gigo or something.

More importantly, though, the fillings were incredibly delicious. To start with, the thickness of the white soup was a complete mystery to me. It was sticky like grated gigo, but had a smooth texture to it. Naturally, there was a strong karon-milk flavor about it. Aside from that, I could taste milk fat and the saltiness of tau oil. Not to mention the strong umami of the meat and veggies.

Myme had perfected the technique of drawing out a dish's richness and flavor though her use of a stock made out of grated vegetables and bones, which she

had utilized to great effect here.

The closest dish I could think to compare it to was probably creamy chicken and vegetable stew. However, the essence of the dish was different. Even if they were similar, they were still pretty distinct.

And as if that mysterious broth itself wasn't enough, you had the ingredients on top of it. The rolled meat, which had a wonderful gelatin-like texture, was definitely giba rib meat. The sweet broth had seeped all the way into the middle of the wrap too.

The meat was cut thin, but then rolled up until it was several layers thick, so it still felt more than substantial enough. It tasted even more delicious when eaten together with the soft aria. The proportions of the various ingredients you got in each bite of poitan you took were so perfect that it seemed like there had to be actual calculations that went into it.

When I took a second bite, I found another trick to it: that second bit of meat wasn't from the ribs, but rather the thighs. It was even chewier than the other one, and the meaty taste was strong enough to not get lost in the richness of the soup.

After the nenon—which was every bit as soft as the aria—I found sirloin meat waiting for me. It was more solid than the rib meat, but also had a finer texture than the thigh meat, which made for another welcome change.

Since it only cost two red coins, there seemed to be about forty grams of each cut of meat. Because the price was set by the castle, there wasn't really any way to change those quantities. Still, it wasn't enough for me. I wanted to eat a whole lot more. It was just that delicious.

After carefully savoring the last bite and swallowing, I turned back toward Myme.

"That was delicious. It's been a while since I last had your cooking, but you really have grown exceptionally skilled at handling giba meat compared to a month ago."

"Thank you. I'm overjoyed to hear you say that about my giba cooking, Asuta," Myme replied with an incredibly proud smile.

As she stared down at the young girl, Sheera Ruu also quietly said, “It’s so good.”

“It’s always shocking to see just how skilled you are, Myme. How did you give the broth that mysterious texture?” I asked.

“I used fuwano, poitan, and gigo. It took a whole lot of time to figure out the amounts.”

“And I’d imagine all sorts of vegetables went into it for flavor too, right? Did you also use kimyuus bones?”

“Yes, leg bones. From both kimyuus and karon. I was thinking of using giba bones as well, but that made the flavor too overpowering, and I just couldn’t make it work.”

That was an issue the Ruu clan and I were currently working on. Giba bone soup had an incredibly powerful stench, so it definitely wasn’t something that would be easy to work with.

“Well, this is a shock. I didn’t expect that your skills would be this incredible... It looks like it really was the right choice for our inn to not bother with a stall,” Milano Mas remarked, unable to hide his surprise.

I spotted Bozl looking closely at Myme’s grinning face after having remained silent all this time. Noticing my gaze, he finally broke out in a broad smile.

“Yes, I find myself quite surprised too. I never would have imagined there was a chef out there even younger than you and yet still on the same level, Sir Asuta. Sir Mikel really must have been as great of a chef as he was reputed to be.”

“Huh? You know about my father?”

“Indeed. I haven’t lived here in Genos all that long, so I never had a chance to eat his cooking, but I’ve certainly heard plenty about him.”

“Ah, sorry. Bozl’s from the castle town and has ties to a chef who knew Mikel’s skills very well, so I told him about your dad,” I chimed in.

“I see,” Myme replied with a carefree smile. “I would be very glad to have someone who knew my father’s cooking taste it. If you could please tell that

person about my dish, I'd really appreciate it."

"I most certainly will. I'm sure Varkas will be overjoyed as well. No doubt, he'll want to taste your cooking himself once he hears about it..." Bozl remarked, his smile growing all the more amused. "However, it would be a little difficult to bring this dish back with me. I imagine you'll hear something from Varkas about trying your cooking soon enough."

"Good. I'll be waiting."

Myme looked somewhat nonchalant, but this meant she might someday be invited to the castle town. If that did happen, there wouldn't be anything strange about it. After all, I found Myme and Varkas to be similarly astounding. And considering her age, Myme seemed to be the chef who had the greatest potential of any I knew.

Cyclaeus isn't around anymore to commit atrocities against chefs, so maybe Myme should follow in Mikel's footsteps and become a chef in the castle town.

It might have been a bit forward of me to start thinking something like that, but it all came down to Myme and Mikel. If they both wished for it, then it certainly wouldn't be impossible.

But for now, I was just incredibly happy to be able to do business alongside a girl so brimming with talent.

3

After that, business continued very smoothly.

The flow of customers picked up again when the sun hit its peak, and though the outdoor restaurant had doubled in size, it was always at full capacity. We didn't get in trouble with the guards again, but it was still plenty hectic.

Together with the Ruu clan, we had five different dishes on offer, and every last one of them sold at a good pace. Among them, the soup was very popular as a side order, and it seemed like over half the customers who came by ordered it, so we definitely didn't have any regrets about the whopping three hundred servings we had prepared.

The giba steak sold just fine too. There was a bottleneck due to the fact that we couldn't premake the dish, but apparently, as the most purely meaty dish we had served yet at the stalls, it had struck a chord with the customers. Though plenty of folks didn't like the taste of it, including those from Jagar, there was always a line in front of the stall.

Then you had the giba curry. That dish did some serious work, pulling in customers from the east. On top of that, as the dish with the most powerful smell, it drew the greatest amount of attention. It had far and away the most customers asking to give it a taste test. And on top of that, since it was a dish already sold at an inn, there were plenty of repeat customers purchasing it.

"All right, I'd like to eat my fill of this stuff. Sell me some more poitan," a customer from the west had requested. It seemed half a poitan wasn't enough, considering the strong taste of the giba curry. But if we weren't careful and increased the amount of poitan too much, it could fill people up and cause a decrease in the sales of other dishes. That made this a pivotal issue to consider.

For the customers from Jagar, we made sure to spread the information that this wasn't a dish from Sym, but was instead created by me, that oddball everyone had heard about, who had come from outside the continent and moved to the forest's edge. Since Sym and Jagar were enemy nations, it would be rather bad if it came to be thought of as a recipe from the eastern kingdom.

For our opening day, our consumer base for the giba curry was working out to about seventy percent easterners, twenty percent westerners, and ten percent southerners, so if that continued, I'd consider it good for a dish that used as many herbs as it did. Though the easterners were claiming the lion's share, we had prepared two hundred small portions of giba curry, so if that ratio held and we sold out, that would still work out to twenty southerners ordering it. I'd call that a pretty good result for the first day.

Around thirty minutes after the sun hit its peak, Myme's stall ended up closing shop. But, well, that was no surprise when she had only prepared thirty meals. Actually, I was shocked they lasted even that long.

"I'm sure it was just the fact that it was giba cooking that attracted attention, so it's really all thanks to you guys."

“That’s not true at all. I’m sure news of how delicious your cooking is will spread, and tomorrow you’ll have even more customers lining up than today.”

“That certainly would make me glad to see.”

At any rate, Myme looked relieved to have sold out. She must have been concerned about the huge losses she would face if she didn’t sell anything, just like I had been back on my first day. Myme and I had both opened for business using funds from our respective houses, and that made for quite a bit of pressure.

“I was thinking I’d like to add ten more meals for an even forty, starting tomorrow.”

“Well, the Ruu clan members and I wanted to buy some meals from you tomorrow. Could you prepare an additional ten meals or so on top of that?”

“Huh? You want to buy that many?”

“Yeah. Eating your cooking provides both a learning experience and an impetus to keep moving forward.”

“Thank you. In that case, I’ll make it fifty meals,” Myme said before heading back to her house in the Turan lands.

After seeing the young girl off, Bartha finished the purchases she needed to make and met up with the rest of the guards. Fitting seventeen people into only three wagons would be rather tight, so some of us would ride in her wagon too on the way to and from town.

Afterward, things progressed normally.

The first dish to sell out was the giba curry, shockingly enough.

It really was overwhelmingly popular with easterners, and there had also been a lot of customers asking for taste tests. Because of that, even though I had made a lot of extra curry to allow for samples, our sales ended up being three whole meals short of two hundred, and we had the same amount of baked poitan left over.

“It sure takes a lot of effort to wash the spoons for taste testing. And there seemed to be a number of customers who waited a bit and then came back for

more samples again and again,” Toor Deen reported, as the one in charge of that stall.

Though samples were an indispensable tool to help spread the word about an unfamiliar taste like curry, it just took up too much time to offer them when the stalls were busy, and there was no guarantee there wouldn’t be more customers crude enough to take advantage of them during the festival. Perhaps it would be best to temporarily suspend all taste testing when the festival kicked off properly on the twenty-second.

Next to run out were the giba steaks. Though they took more time to prepare and didn’t have the quickest sales as a result, I had limited the amount I made, even though they were a new dish, and this was the outcome. That still meant selling a hundred of them, so those were perfectly acceptable results. I made a mental note that I would have to offer them again a number of times before the end of the revival festival.

After that, Ai Fa left the stall, and I moved on to helping out with the restaurant area.

The expanded seating area was bustling with activity, but we had an appropriate number of people working the area, so it wasn’t really an issue. The women working there for the first time today seemed quite struck by how lively it was, as well as how friendly the citizens of Genos were.

Of course, it wasn’t as if everyone in Genos had overcome their fear and distrust of the people of the forest’s edge. However, nearly everyone who visited our stalls had. Even with hunters hanging around with swords, nobody seemed particularly concerned about that fact. When Yumi stopped by in the afternoon, she had a friendly chat with Ludo Ruu over in the customer seating.

“Asuta, there’s something I’ve been thinking,” Ama Min Rutim called out from the giba hot pot stew stall. “Shouldn’t we have the northern clans and the Beim—those who are opposed to our doing business in the post town—see this sight? I’ve felt that way more and more ever since we added the chairs and tables to this space.”

“That’s true. I was already thinking of asking the Beim to help out with the stalls. Has Sufira Zaza’s group headed back to the northern settlement yet?”

“No, they’ll still be here for a while longer. It seems they intend to return together with Lem Dom.”

In that case, it was possible that it would be worth inviting Sufira Zaza’s group, even if it ended up being just to observe rather than help out. After all, I couldn’t help but feel the outdoor restaurant was doing a lot to help forge bonds between the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk of Genos.

Then, when there was just a little bit of time left till closing, the giba hot pot stew sold out. That just left the giba manju and myamuu giba.

Unsurprisingly, the new items had an edge in terms of sales. Even so, the giba manju and myamuu giba still sold a fair bit as well. In particular, I’d say the giba manju put up a good fight, not losing out to the newness of the giba steak despite being priced the same.

Closing time arrived at the lower second hour. We had just three servings of the giba manju and eight of the myamuu giba left over. That wasn’t even enough to be worth reselling to The Kimyuus’s Tail. And so, the giba manju went into the hunters’ bellies, while the uncooked myamuu giba would come back with us to the settlement.

In terms of total sales, they worked out to 300 of the giba hot pot stew, 197 of the giba curry, 132 of the myamuu giba, 117 of the giba manju, and 100 of the giba steak. The Fa clan earned 729.5 red coins, and the Ruu 648, making for a total of 1,377.5 coins.

It was such a haul that it would be difficult to lift without subdividing it, so naturally the women who were working with us for the first time today were stunned when they saw the scale of our earnings. My perception was that the red coins of this world held about the same value as 200 yen, so this worked out to around 275,500 yen in sales.

“No wonder you need guards watching over you! It wouldn’t be surprising at all for outsiders who aren’t afraid of us people of the forest’s edge to get some foul ideas at the sight of all those coins!” Dan Rutim remarked while stuffing his cheeks with a leftover giba manju. “There’s not really any point asking now, but how many giba is that money worth?”

“Well, if you include the pelt on top of the horns and tusks...it would be the

equivalent of fifty-seven giba.”

“Fifty-seven giba’s worth of coins in just one day?! That really is something!”

“True... But now giba meat is a proper commodity to be sold as well. Even on the low end, a single giba would work out to two hundred red coins now, so thinking of it that way, our sales today would instead be worth around six or seven giba.”

“Giba meat is selling for that much? That’s quite the enormous fortune,” Rau Lea interjected, sounding astonished.

“Right. But at least for now, the only ones who will purchase the giba meat itself, rather than meals made with it, are Myme and the inns we have ties to. They’ll be increasing the amount they purchase during the revival festival, but normally we can only sell around three giba worth of meat.”

“So if we can sell even more of the stuff, it’ll bring prosperity to everyone at the forest’s edge, right?” Rau Lea replied with a nod, looking satisfied. “I finally get what the Fa clan is trying to do. You really did come up with an extraordinary idea there.”

“Y-You only just got it now? But didn’t we discuss it way back at the clan head meeting?”

That said, the value of meat hadn’t been set back then. And the wholesale price was still being decided even now. The castle was currently thinking that ultimately, it should settle around the same price as karon torso meat.

Karon torso meat cost over seven red coins for a kilo, even at merchant rates. Giba meat changed based on the cut, but it averaged at around five red coins.

The current thought was that the price of giba meat would eventually need to be brought to the same price as karon torso meat in order to prevent the nobles from buying it all up. Even though I had concerns that raising it so high would make it difficult to sell in the post town, it certainly would result in a great deal of wealth flowing in.

Polarth was working on a grandiose plan of his own, saying, “In that case, we just need to make the post town and the Daleim and Turan lands well off enough that they can buy it at that rate.”

“I see. I didn’t know giba meat was bringing in that much money either. That’s a lot more impressive than the reward money the castle pays out,” Ludo Ruu, who had been talking to Bartha, added in an amused tone. “That reward money is fifteen hundred red coins, yeah? I thought that was amazing at first, but they only pay it once every three months. You all made about that much in a single day, which is kind of unbelievable.”

“Yeah, but we also have to pay for our ingredients and everything too. In terms of pure profit, I doubt that we exceeded a thousand red coins.”

“That’s still really impressive. Well, not that I care about the reward money or anything, though.”

“Now that you mention it, the most recent reward money payment was given to the Sauti clan, right?”

Since the fall of the Suun clan, the reward money had only been paid out once, back in the black month. It had been decided that it would be given to any impoverished clans who needed it, but since no one had stepped forward to claim it, it was left untouched. Ultimately, the Sauti clan ended up requesting some of it to compensate for the great losses they suffered from fighting the lord of the forest.

“If a leading clan like the Sauti uses it first, then the other clans should feel a bit less ashamed to ask, hopefully,” Dari Sauti had stated.

In a meeting between the leading clan heads, it was decided that the Sauti would be provided five hundred red coins out of the reward money. They hoped to use that money to buy expensive medicine and nutritious food in order to regain their strength.

“Still, if there are coins to spare, they should be used to buy wagons and totos for other folks. Then everyone would find it easier to make purchases,” Ludo Ruu said casually, and I almost dropped the metal tray I was holding while cleaning up the stall.

“Th-That’s a great idea! You should definitely raise it with Donda Ruu!”

“Hmm? I just threw what I was thinking out there. Aren’t wagons seriously expensive?”

“The one we have here with the canopy cost twelve hundred red coins. The roofless wagons used by the Zaza and Sauti would be even cheaper than that. So, if they could make a leather canopy themselves to guard against rain, that would be a great investment.”

The journey to the post town to make purchases was definitely a big hassle for every clan. That was why I had bought a totos and wagon for the local clans, to make it easier on them so that they could have the time needed to help out with the smoking process.

If they could free up labor on that front, even the smaller clans would be able to devote the time needed for cooking better meals and making smoked foods. As the one who showed them the importance of not only more prosperous lives but also delicious food, that felt really significant to me.

“Well, if you really think so, I’ll go ahead and pass it along to my old man. The smaller clans are real stubborn and don’t seem to want to touch the reward money at all too...”

“Right, thanks.”

With that, we finally finished our cleanup. After putting a rope around the outdoor seating, we began our triumphant return to the forest’s edge.

After splitting off into groups to return the stalls, purchase ingredients, and exchange coins, we headed down the stone road. I ended up in a group with Toor Deen, Sheera Ruu, and Rimee Ruu, accompanied by Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu, and we headed to the stall run by Yang, the chef from the castle town.

Yang was the head chef of the house of Daleim, which Polarth belonged to. Just like us, he was working to promote the spread of new ingredients throughout the post town. And starting today, he was serving a new dish at his stall.

“Ah, Sir Asuta. I’m grateful to you for going out of your way to stop by,” Yang said with a polite bow of his head as we arrived at his stall at the southern end of the stall area. Assisting him was the Daleim house’s maid, Nicola. Though I had just seen both of them at the noblewomen’s tea party, I was still glad to find them looking well. “We were just about to close up shop, so I am glad that you made it in time.”

“That really is fortunate. How has your new dish been selling?”

“It has been going fairly well,” Yang answered with a gentle smile. “There are a great many other stalls utilizing new ingredients now, so I may not be drawing that much attention, but I would say it sold quite favorably for its first day.”

There had been a period of time when the air in the stall area had been heavy with the aroma of karon milk and milk fat, but now there were all sorts of scents drifting around. What stood out most were the stimulating smell of herbs from Sym and the fragrant scent of tau oil. Polarth and the house of Saturas had been working together in order to gradually introduce these novel ingredients to the post town.

Shops working with them, like Tanto’s Blessing, received lectures on how to use new ingredients properly. In order to not fall behind, all sorts of shops were seeking such a relationship at this point.

“Now I can finally start using karon back meat. Would you like to give it a taste?”

“Yes, of course.”

Yang nodded and signaled for Nicola to get started. With a sour look on her face, she scooped the contents of the pot out onto a round piece of poitan. It looked to be meat and vegetables boiled in a dark-orange broth. Then she pinched the poitan tightly together at the top, creating something that looked just like the kimyuus meat manju I had once eaten.

“One this size sells for two red coins. As that’s on the expensive side, we have leftovers, but once the festival starts there will be more people around and we’ll be able to sell out.”

It had a diameter of around ten centimeters. In terms of volume, that put it around the same size as the poitan wraps we sold. We priced ours at one and a half red coins, but if Yang’s recipe used karon torso meat, then it was inevitable that his would be more expensive.

Yang’s metal pot was partitioned into two parts, and one of them was nearly empty. That must have been the karon leg meat dish, which was able to sell out due to its cheap price.

Since I wasn't especially hungry, I just purchased two orders to split among the four of us. As long as we split it before biting in, it was allowable to share a meal with people outside your family in that way.

"Well then, let's dig in."

The scent of the filling was a bit on the sweet side. The soup's base seemed to be ground nenon, and there were also plenty of finely diced bits of meat and vegetables. I couldn't smell any herbs at all in the dish, though. Since we hadn't had any especially bad experiences with Yang's cooking, we were all able to bite into it without any worries.

It really did have a sweet, gentle flavor. Had he used tau oil and sugar? If I had to say, I'd peg it as being a fairly Japanese-styled flavoring.

Karon was close to beef in terms of taste, and he had used back meat, so it was very tender. The vegetables seemed to be the taro-like ma gigo, the daikon-like sheema, and the shiitake-like mushroom.

"This is delicious, and it goes down easy too. I'm sure customers from Jagar would be very happy with it."

"Yes, my intent was to make a Jagar-style dish this time around."

Was this the result of him incorporating Myme and Reina Ruu's opinions that complicated flavors weren't well suited to the post town? At any rate, Yang was wearing a very calm smile.

"The seasonings and ingredients virtually all came from Jagar. It's still my duty as a chef to consider how many ingredients from the west and east can be combined with it, but for now I'd like to work on that bit by bit."

"Yeah, this feels like a fitting dish to sell in the post town."

On top of that, a simple dish like this allowed Yang to show off his real abilities. Just as he had demonstrated at the noblewomen's tea party, he seemed quite capable when it came to putting together delicate flavors.

I got the feeling that in the past he would have used that cinnamon-like herb in this dish, and I felt that the fact that he hadn't this time was a sign of his resolve to mind his customers. A more complex seasoning would surely make

folks in the castle town happier. But this was a dish aimed at the citizens of the post town, and Yang had adjusted his thinking to reflect that.

“I will stop by your shop tomorrow, Sir Asuta. By the way, how was the dish prepared by Sir Mikel’s daughter?”

“I think it turned out to be even more amazing than her last one. If she increases the number of portions she brings to maybe one or two hundred, it might even start to have an impact on our sales.”

“I see. I’m certainly looking forward to giving it a try,” he said with a smile that was mild-mannered but still had some real energy behind it. Myme’s cooking would surely leave a big impression on Yang too, and get him quietly fired up as well.

That got me wondering in the back of my head just what a certain other chef from the castle town—Roy—was up to. A while back, he had suffered a shock, not only from Myme’s cooking, but also from the growth shown by Reina and Sheera Ruu, and I hadn’t seen him at all since then.

“Well then, I’ll see you again tomorrow. Thanks for today.”

With that, we took off back down the road.

As we went, I asked the women, “So, what did you all think of Yang’s dish?”

“I believe it was his most delicious one yet. As you said, I was able to eat it very naturally,” Toor Deen replied.

“That’s true. But I believe the dishes made by that Naudis man are more to our tastes, since he uses giba meat,” Sheera Ruu added.

Beside them, Rimee Ruu had a bit of a serious look on her face. “That sweet from the castle town was really tasty. Don’t you think that guy could make something way better?”

“Well, folks in the castle town and post town want different flavors. Yang had only ever prepared food for people in the castle town before, which has presented all sorts of difficulties for him. But he said sweets were his greatest specialty, so that might have been why even those of us who aren’t fond of castle town-style dishes still liked it.”

Chefs like Mikel and Varkas would surely be skilled enough to overcome anyone's personal preferences. And I figured that Yang had to be as skillful as they were when it came to making sweets.

"Well, we've got to worry more about ourselves than others. We'll be really busy with our preparations, so let's work hard heading into tomorrow."

After I wrapped things up with that innocuous statement, we went to meet up with the others at The Kimyuus's Tail.

But we only made it a few more steps before Ai Fa called out, "Hold on. Something concerning is coming this way. Move to the side of the road."

"Huh? What's going on?"

Her reaction was almost like the time when Kamyua Yoshu's group had shown up with the captured Zattsu Suun, so it had me feeling seriously bewildered, but I wasn't about to doubt Ai Fa's senses. We promptly followed her instructions.

"Hmm? What's that? It doesn't seem like a fight or anything, but it sure does sound lively," Ludo Ruu pondered, covering the others behind him.

It was around twenty seconds later when I finally noticed what he was talking about. The passersby also stopped and stared in amazement. There was a group marching in from the south, accompanied by fanfare. Surprised voices could be heard exclaiming "Ooh!" and "Aah!" None of them were outright shouting, but there was definitely a reason the visitors were causing such astonishment. I waited for the group to pass by, staring out at the street over Ai Fa's shoulder...and sure enough, I ended up letting out a "Whoa" of my own.

It was a large troupe, with a number of wagons being pulled along behind them. The fanfare I had mentioned was quite literal, as they were steadily progressing down the street to the sound of flutes, drums, and what seemed to be some kind of string instruments.

The first thing to catch my eye was the head wagon. It was around two sizes bigger than the one we used and had a canopy, but it wasn't pulled by toots. Rather, it was pulled along by a massive reptile that looked like a crocodile. Actually, I only thought that because of its size. Its body was shaped more like a typical lizard. It was almost like looking at a dinosaur. Including its long tail, it

had to be at least three meters long. It had sand-colored scales densely coating its body and was slowly moving down the street on four legs. Its head was around the size of a horse's, and it had reins and a bridle around its neck and in its mouth. It had a goofy face just like a lizard's, but its size alone was enough to make it seem frightening. It was the king of all lizards, like a komodo dragon, but even bigger.

There were two of those huge lizards pulling the wagon, just like it would have been if they'd been toots. Holding their reins was a little old man with a pure-white head of hair.

It was forbidden to ride wagons through the post town, so the man was walking on the ground as he led the beasts. He was dressed in a worn-out black-and-gray-speckled robe, and gave an impression similar to a withered branch.

"Oh wow, it's like a madama snake went and grew legs," Ludo Ruu commented, sounding deeply intrigued.

Fortunately, only that first wagon used those massive lizards. The other six were all pulled by two toots each. However, the folks holding their reins all had rather unusual appearances.

There was an incredibly large man.

A little guy with his face hidden behind a mask.

A bewitching and beautiful woman in an outfit made of some lightweight fabric, decorated with mysterious patterns.

And someone wearing old armor and a helmet, whose movements were stilted like a robot.

This mysterious group was slowly marching through the Genos post town while playing flutes and banging on drums.

It was almost as if I were daydreaming.

"Come one, come all! We are the Gamley Troupe! Have all of you in Genos been doing well while we were away?" a young girl's voice sounded out clearly from high up, with enough force behind it to not be drowned out by all the instruments. It had come from the largest of the wagons, the one in the middle.

There was a small girl seated up on the roof, tossing out bloodred flowers as she spoke. “We’ve stopped by once again this year, so let’s all have fun as we celebrate the sun god’s revival!”

That girl had a rather eccentric appearance too.

It was hard to tell since she was seated, but she seemed to be rather small. She had to be somewhere around Tsuvai’s height. She wore what looked like a brilliant scarlet haori and spoke almost as if she were singing.

Her hair was incredibly long and pitch-black, and the numerous braids she wore it in fluttered alongside her haori. Her skin was pale, her lips red, and I could even tell that she had big black eyes from this distance.

When she passed pretty close to us, I noticed her suddenly glance my way. Her lips rose into a crescent-shaped grin. Then, she gently tossed down a red flower.

The flower must have weighed hardly anything at all, but it shockingly almost landed right on top of my head. The instant before it touched my hair, though, Ai Fa swiftly snatched it.

“It doesn’t seem to be poisonous...” my clan head remarked before handing it to me. The flower had numerous overlapping petals, kind of like a crimson hydrangea.

With a wink, the girl faced forward again and rode on past us.

That was our first peculiar encounter with the Gamley Troupe, who had come to Genos in order to add some pizazz to the sun god’s revival festival.



Chapter 2: The Gamley Troupe

1

It was now the seventeenth of the violet month.

We had once again done an enormous amount of preparation for today before we departed from the forest's edge, and when we arrived at The Kimyuus's Tail to borrow our stalls, we found Telia Mas waiting there.

"Good morning. These are the meals for today, as well as three days' worth of fresh meat."

"Thank you. You came to pick up the stalls, right?"

Even with Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu accompanying us, Telia Mas greeted us with a gentle smile. After she had come along on the field trip to the forest's edge, her fear of hunters seemed to have softened a good bit.

However, after she took the meals and meat into the kitchen, she took a step outside the inn alongside us and then suddenly froze. Ji Maam was standing there with the wagons, having accompanied us to the post town as a guard for the first time.

"M-My apologies. I was just taken off guard." Though she had gone somewhat pale, Telia Mas still put on a brave smile.

Looking like he wasn't even sure what she was apologizing for, Ji Maam tilted his head. He was the eldest son of the main Maam house, a clan that fell under the Ruu. Though he was nineteen years old just like Darmu Ruu, he was nearly two meters tall, making him abnormally large even for a person of the forest's edge. His build was just as brawny as Donda Ruu's too. In the festival of the hunt before last, I had been terrified half to death, watching him face off against Ai Fa in the contest of strength.

Even so, this little encounter didn't turn into anything more serious than that, and we all headed around to the back of the inn. As she gripped her chest and

got her breathing under control, Telia Mas said to me, “Your business with the stalls seems to be going quite well, doesn’t it? My dad said you aren’t having any trouble at all despite how much you’ve expanded.”

“Right. I was worried we might have a little trouble until the proper start of the revival festival, but for now everything’s just fine.”

“There are five days left till the day of dawn, right? There seem to be a few more people around even now, but the number of customers will probably double by then.”

The sun god’s revival festival officially started on the twenty-second of the violet month, and the first day was a holiday known as the day of dawn.

Four days later on the twenty-sixth was the day of the sun’s peak. The thirty-first was the last day of the year, the day of the downfall, and then the silver month began with the day of the return on the first. Those four holidays were when the revival festival would be its most jubilant.

On those special days, the castle provided a large amount of kimyuus meat and fruit wine. People were supposed to cut down on labor as much as possible during the day and instead celebrate the sun god’s revival while enjoying those offerings.

We people of the forest’s edge were planning on unveiling our whole roast giba by doing much the same thing. Even if it was forbidden to do business during the day, there was no issue with offering free samples. We would stay the night before at Dora’s place, then head to our usual space first thing in the morning and get to work on the roasting.

Of course, we had Yang convey a message to Polarth, who in turn got in touch with Duke Genos, and he gave his permission for us to do this. We were told that it wasn’t as if it would be blasphemy against the sun god to provide something other than kimyuus meat, and that it didn’t seem like a bad idea at all to offer free giba meat for the festival.

The festival was also really bustling during the night on those holidays, with even more lighting provided along the streets than usual and large crowds packing in around the stalls. That was when the real competition among the stalls would happen.

We people of the forest's edge would be doing business in the post town at night, which was really exciting. A nighttime festival would be a great place to have exchanges between them and the townsfolk. It was an opportunity I had been eagerly waiting for.

"By the way, is The Kimyuus's Tail really not going to put out a stall?" I asked as Telia Mas pulled the stalls out of storage.

"We aren't," Telia Mas replied with a shake of her head. "We've only just gotten to the point where we're selling meals with giba meat in our dining hall, and we decided that things wouldn't go well if we tried to do too much all at once."

Yes, The Kimyuus's Tail had finally started buying fresh giba meat too, with the introduction of giba curry, and had been selling freshly prepared giba meals.

Their menu included the giba curry I had taught them how to make, giba meatballs, and a meat and pepe sauté. And fortunately, those dishes were apparently selling just as well as the sweet and sour giba and tino rolls the Ruu clan and I provided for them.

"Now that I think about it, my dad said he wants to up the amount of giba meat we purchase next time. Would that be all right?"

"Of course that'd be fine. Please let me know when you've decided on how much you'll need."

Because of the incredible amount of preparatory work now needed for the food for the stalls, we couldn't increase the number of meals we offered to the inns any further. For that reason, The Sledgehammer and The Great Southern Tree were keeping their meal orders the same but had drastically increased the amount of fresh meat they asked for.

I had figured those two inns could get by with the products of their own kitchens alone at this point, but then they had passed along some information that I found rather embarrassing—that it was great publicity for them to be able to say they offered cooking prepared by Asuta of the forest's edge. So we were still set to keep on selling them our dishes too.

And though we would be using a lot more giba meat during the revival

festival, by asking a bunch of other clans from all around the forest's edge for help, we'd be able to handle it with no problem. The Ruu were entering into their break period, which meant their stock of usable entrails would soon be exhausted, so they were set to start purchasing those from other clans soon.

The Ruu were also steadily interacting more and more with the smaller clans they didn't have strong ties to in the past. That was yet another result brought about by our business in the post town.

"Here are all the stalls. Good luck in your business today."

"Thank you," Reina Ruu replied with a smile. Though the two had been rather awkward around one another when they first met, they were now close friends.

"Ah, and I have a message from my dad. He says to take care not to cause trouble with any outsiders."

"Outsiders?"

"Yes. He must have been talking about those traveling performers. They're apparently setting up their tent right in front of your stalls."

That Gamley Troupe who passed by us yesterday, huh? They really were a mysterious group, and an unspecific word like "fishy" or whatever certainly didn't seem like it would sum them up properly.

"It's my first time seeing traveling performers. Do we really need to be cautious around them?"

"I'm not sure. Just looking at them is enough to frighten me a bit, so I've never really gone near them... But if they cause a commotion, they'll be banned from entering Genos ever again, so I wouldn't really expect them to do anything violent."

In that case, I hoped we could work together to help get people fired up for the revival festival.

"Okay, let's be off. Please give Milano Mas our regards."

With that, we headed back toward the stall area once more.

It really was feeling like the numbers of passersby and guards were on the rise. There was also a feeling of cheer in the air, undoubtedly because the

revival festival was fast approaching.

After purchasing the necessary vegetables from Dora's stall like always, we headed for our reserved space. Once again, we found dozens of customers waiting there. However, today there was a fantastical sight towering over that familiar scene.

"Whoa, what's that?" Ludo Ruu asked.

On the other side of the street from the space reserved for our outdoor restaurant, something truly astonishing had been set up. A patchwork tent had been erected there, filling enough space for ten stalls or so. It had to be the traveling performers'.

The roof had a somewhat flattened cone shape, and at its highest point it must have reached five meters. Was the tent made out of leather, perhaps? The colors were different in various places where patches had been added, so it must have been pretty old.

Just like the tents I was familiar with, it was held in place by sturdy ropes anchored to the ground, but it had a bit of a lopsided look to it. Parts of it here and there looked squashed, making the whole thing seem kind of distorted. The way it was massive yet shabby made me think of a dinosaur's remains and reminded me of the Suun clan's ritual hall.

"So those guys from yesterday put this up? How do you make something this ridiculously huge in just a single night, though?" Ludo Ruu wondered.

"Well, it might not be too difficult to just raise some supports and stretch the roof and walls out over it... Still, this is pretty surprising, huh?" I responded.

After all, the width alone was the equivalent of ten stalls. Even with our stalls and restaurant space combined, the tent could still cover the whole thing. And it was located right on the opposite side of the street from us too. It was only natural that Milano Mas would have concerns.

The majority of the folks waiting for our arrival were staring up at the tent with curiosity written all over their faces. But the huge tent just stood there silently, knowing nothing of their bewilderment.

"It's kind of eerie somehow... This is what Rimee's been so excited about?"

Vina Ruu questioned with a troubled frown. Rimee Ruu must have already heard about the traveling performers from Tara.

“Well, Tara seemed really excited about them. And that eeriness might just be part of their overall staging to attract attention.”

Though I wasn’t all that familiar with them, circuses in Japan were supposed to be pretty otherworldly too. But if this was something Tara was that excited about, I wanted to believe they wouldn’t be showing off anything cruel or grotesque.

“Well, they don’t seem to be open for business yet anyway, so let’s just ignore them and get everything prepared. We’ll start by cleaning up the restaurant space.”

Getting back on track, we went ahead and set the stalls in place. Before long, the group that had been delivering meals to the other inns arrived, and our preparations advanced without a hitch.

The Fa clan’s special for the day was roast giba, which we hadn’t served in a while. We, of course, used sirloin for the cut, which was sliced to a thickness of around one centimeter, then presented along with warm vegetables boiled in a special sauce.

The special sauce used finely chopped aria as a base, which was comparatively simple. I still added tau oil, sugar, and red mamaria vinegar even so. I had done a lot of experimentation with it in order to draw out the taste of the roast giba meat to its fullest.

For the warm vegetables, I went with the cabbage-like tino, arugula-like ro’hyoi, and zucchini-like chan. I heated those back up on-site along with the sauce, then cut off a slice of the meat I had roasted back home and added it on top. Just like yesterday, I had brought along a hundred portions of the meal.

The amount of meat worked out to 120 grams for the price of two red coins, and it also came with half of a baked poitan. The plan was to keep all the specials around the same volume. Though it was possible it wouldn’t have as strong of an impact as the steak, I could confidently recommend it based on how it tasted.

It was also the day that the Ruu clan would be unveiling their teriyaki meat stew for the first time. Other than that, the menu and meal counts would be the same as yesterday. We kept the baked poitan with the giba curry at the same half size as the ones with the soups and specials for now.

The Fa and Ruu had also both increased our staff by one each. We added a Dagora woman to our roster, and the Ruu did the same with a Muufa woman. And so, aside from me handling the specials on my own, that allowed us to put two people on each stall.

We had also decided to not do any rotation during the festival period. Since it would be so busy, we figured it was best not to move people around unnecessarily, so each group would stay in their current positions until the end of the sun god's revival festival.

The giba curry and pasta would be handled by Toor Deen and the Gaaz woman.

Yamiru Lea and the Dagora woman were in charge of the giba manju and poitan wraps.

Tsuwai and the Muufa woman handled the myamuu giba and giba burgers.

Ama Min Rutim and the Min woman took care of the teriyaki meat stew and giba hot pot stew.

Finally, the outdoor restaurant was staffed by the two Ruu women, the Lea woman, Yun Sudra, and the Ratsu woman.

That was how we had things laid out.

I was in the middle of negotiating with the Beim clan head to get someone to help out with my stall too, but I had been told that he would make a decision after hearing how today went from the Dagora woman, who fell under his clan. If the Beim pulled out, that Dagora woman would also stop working with us, and we would need to scout two more people from other clans.

But at any rate, there weren't any issues today as I was preparing the roast giba, which took less time to prepare than the steak. And since the Ruu and their subordinate clans had provided five hunters to act as guards, Ai Fa came over to help me out right from the start.

On top of that, we had two members of the Zaza clan along today to observe: Sufira Zaza and Mei Jeen Zaza, who had been staying at the Ruu settlement for some time now. Lem Dom was accompanying them too, likely on Sufira Zaza's request. Since she had been dragged over to the post town despite not having much interest in it, Lem Dom had a really sulky look on her face the whole time.

That meant we had fourteen chefs, seven guards including Ai Fa and Bartha, and three observers, making for a large group of twenty-four in total. We were also bringing along an extraordinary amount of food, which left our four wagons packed to capacity.

"Well then, let's go ahead and open for business," I declared once I got the signal that the other stalls were all ready.

The gathered customers rushed the special dish and teriyaki meat stew stalls first. They unsurprisingly wanted to sample the new dishes.

After I cut off some meat for taste testing and added the special sauce over the top, I went ahead and offered it to the customers. Just like yesterday, a number of hands scrambled to reach out for it.

"Yup, this is just as tasty as the meat from yesterday!"

"Really? I'd say that grilled meat was better..."

"That was good too, of course, but you know...doesn't this seem even meatier somehow?"

Those customers from the west and south were freely sharing their opinions. Meanwhile, a customer from the east slipped past them and held out his coins.

"Hey, no cutting!"

"Are you, buying? My apologies. If you are, please, go ahead."

"Of course we are! Hey, give me a plate of this!"

"Right, thank you."

I left it entirely up to Ai Fa to accept payment, while I swiftly cut off slices of roast giba. After ladling out some of the boiled vegetables onto a flat plate, I placed the meat on top. As I prepared one dish after another, folks kept on showing up in front of the stall.

Once around twenty minutes or so had passed, the familiar clear voice of a girl commented, “Ooh, so this is giba meat? It has an awfully appetizing color, doesn’t it?”

Without thinking, I stopped working and glanced her way.

She had long black hair, pale skin, big black eyes, and red lips... It was that same girl who had tossed a red flower to me from the roof of a wagon on our way back yesterday. For some reason, I gulped, but then I called out, “Welcome. You’re one of those traveling performers, aren’t you? If you’d like, you can go ahead and take a sample from this plate.”

“My, it makes me happy to hear that you remembered me.”

Somehow, the way she spoke didn’t seem to match her young age. Actually, she looked young, but just how old was she, actually? She was only about as tall as Tsuvai, no more than around 130 centimeters or so, but her manner of speech and just the general aura about her felt oddly mature.

Just like yesterday, she wore her glossy black hair in a number of braids, which hung all the way down to around her knees. Her bangs were cut evenly above her eyes, giving her an appearance that somehow reminded me of a Japanese doll. Her brilliant scarlet haori had wide flowing sleeves, and I couldn’t help but see it as Japanese attire. But it only came down to the middle of her thighs, fully exposing her shockingly white legs. The unusual piece of clothing had sparkling decorative strings attached to it, and there were a number of small bags dangling from her hips. The bags appeared to be made of a high-quality fabric rather than ordinary cloth.

Her eyes were big, her nose was small, and her lips were bloodred. Her face was almost shockingly well-proportioned. Still, I just couldn’t quite feel calm with her around. She really did look like a doll that someone had breathed life into.

She was so small and incredibly slender, yet had an incredible sense of presence about her. That wasn’t just because of her striking appearance, but also the otherworldly feel she gave off. Beside me, Ai Fa’s eyes also narrowed in a probing gaze.

“We gather unusual creatures from all over the world. We’ve even talked

about wanting to capture a giba from the forest of Morga. I certainly never imagined I would be eating one first, though,” the girl said in a strange intonation, sounding almost as if she were singing. It was a very pleasant voice that crept deep into my ears. And yet, I still didn’t feel at ease hearing it. Just like yesterday, the girl then broke out in a crescent moon-like grin and said, “You don’t mind if I have a taste test? In that case, I’ll go right ahead.” The folks gathered around the stalls were all now watching the girl while looking rather dumbstruck. But she paid them no heed and casually grabbed one of the skewers from the plate, then brought the meat on the end to her red lips and popped it in. “My, how delicious... It certainly feels like it would provide some real strength.”

“Th-Thank you.”

“I’ll have to let everyone know about this... By the way, could I make a request of you?” she asked, standing tiptoe and bringing her face close to mine. “If folks like us were to use your seating, it could end up drawing a bit too much attention, right? So would you mind serving us your cooking on plates we bring ourselves?”

“Of course. That wouldn’t be an issue at all.”

“Glad to hear it. In that case, I’ll come back with some plates and trays.”

After shooting me one last coquettish glance, the mysterious girl left with her haori fluttering behind her as she went.

“What an unusual girl... If I ran into her at night, I might mistake her for some sort of ghost.”

“Did you see her eyes? They looked as black as the cursed jewels of Sym.”

“Ugh, I felt a chill run down my spine. I should go buy some fruit wine to cheer me up.”

Apparently, the customers felt the same way I had. With her eyes still narrowed, Ai Fa kept her gaze fixed on the girl as she left.

“Well, whatever. Hey, give me one of those. It’s two red coins, right?”

“Ah, yes. Thank you,” I replied, getting my head back on straight and

resuming business.

The girl reappeared when there was a bit of a lull in the flow of customers.

“Sorry for the wait. This blockhead wasn’t listening to what I had to say at all.”

The girl had brought along four other members of her group. Fortunately, they didn’t have overly eccentric appearances. Still, they didn’t look particularly ordinary either.

One was a rather good-looking young man in a flat cap. He wore a couple layers of vest-like garments with stylish patterns, and he had a guitar-like stringed instrument on his back. He was just a touch taller than I was and was rather slim, seeming pretty lanky overall. If I had to guess, I would say he was a bit over twenty. His longish hair was dark brown and his eyes were sparkling and brown too, while his skin color fell somewhere between ivory-white and tanned. I had no doubt at all that he was a westerner. The previously mentioned blockhead was probably this guy, since he responded to the comment with a strained chuckle and shrug of his shoulders.

Beside him were two adorable girls who looked like twins... Actually, one of them might have been a boy. They looked so similar, I figured they had to be identical, but now that I thought about it, I had never seen any other twins before, so I couldn’t really say for certain.

At any rate, they had very dainty and clean-cut features. They were both smaller than the girl in the haori and were clearly younger too. Probably not more than ten. They both had beautiful chestnut-colored hair, light reddish-brown eyes, and porcelain-white skin.

The two wore delicately embroidered outfits that looked similar to ponchos, and their hair was cut evenly and somewhat short, so it was hard to tell what their gender was. Their hair was a little curly too, making them look like twin angels. But they seemed somewhat timid, huddling together as their little hands held a plate and a tray. Their eyes looked somehow unsettled and ill at ease as they stared back at me.

The last member of the group stood out in terms of his strange appearance. He was only around 150 or so centimeters tall and was wearing a mask. I clearly remembered seeing him leading a wagon yesterday.

He was about as small as the Sudra clan head Raielfam Sudra, yet the arms coming out of his cloth vest were absurdly long, and were ruggedly muscular too. He had a bit of a slouched posture, a long torso, and short legs. He looked like he would be strong in a fight, with a real intensity about him that you didn't usually see from townsfolk.

His mask was leather and completely hid everything from his neck on up. It had a brim that extended out right above his eyebrows, so I couldn't even tell what sort of look his eyes had. There were a number of narrow air holes around his mouth, like you'd see on a western helmet back in my old world, but all I could see through them was darkness.

"Really, why do I have to act as an errand boy? Wasting time means less earnings, you know," the young guy in the flat cap remarked in a sarcastic tone. "I earn dozens of coins with each song I sing. Can you reimburse me for those losses, Pino?"

"Oh, be quiet. I don't have coins to spare for a blockhead who slept in till the sun was this high in the sky, Neeya."

It seemed the girl's name was Pino, while the guy was Neeya.

With a bewitching grin, Pino glared at Neeya's slender face from the side.

"Feel free to raise that sickly-sweet voice of yours as much as you please once we're done here. But if you don't want the troupe leader to roast you whole, then stop grumbling and get to work."

"Hmph," Neeya started to say, but then his eyes suddenly shot open in wonder. He was looking straight at Ai Fa. "My, how exquisite! A beauty most unsuited for this filthy post town! Charming lady, what is your name?"

Ai Fa's eyes instantly closed halfway, filling with an unspeakable apathy.

"Ah, I am the minstrel Neeya. Though I may currently be living as a traveling performer, once I return to the capital, I am set to be welcomed as a court musician. Won't you join me on the path that will take us there?"

Though Ai Fa remained silent, Pino's lips twisted as she remarked in my clan head's place, "Let me just warn you, this scoundrel here is a blockhead who has tried to walk the world relying on lip service alone. If you believe what he says,

you'll lose everything and be left out in the cold."

"Do be quiet, Pino. Even here in Genos, I am the only one with a pass to the castle town, am I not?" Neeya retorted with a smile. While plenty of young women out there would surely find him charming, unfortunately for him, he was dealing with Ai Fa. No matter how many words he spewed, her gaze only kept growing chillier.

"Jeez, there's no point wasting time on this fool. Let's hurry up and finish with our business," Pino said, swiftly giving up, and then her mysterious black eyes scanned the line of stalls. "Hey mister, are all the stalls lined up here serving giba?"

"Ah, yes, that's right. You can sample everything but the manju from the neighboring stall, so please, go right ahead."

"Oh, no, I've already gotten a taste of giba meat, so I can't imagine having any complaints at this point. But having so many options makes it difficult to choose. There are thirteen of us, so roughly how much would we need to buy to fill our stomachs?"

"Thirteen, huh? Let's see... An average man would be full after eating two of our servings, while a sparse eater or a woman could get by with just one, I'd say."

Apparently, there were eight other people in the troupe in addition to these five. That sounded about right, considering they had brought seven wagons along with them.

"Hmm. Even our women and old folks can really eat, though, so I guess we'd need two helpings for each of us."

"Huh? But..." I started to reply, looking over at the twins without thinking. The two young children gave a start and huddled together extremely close in response.

"Ah, it's true that Arun and Amin only eat about as much as a kimyuus pecking at feed, but we've also got some big eaters who would happily help themselves to whatever's left over."

Now that she mentioned it, their troupe did have that one guy who was even

bigger than Ji Maam. He certainly seemed like he could eat more than most.

“Well then, we’ll go with two meals for each of...”

“Ah, could you please not include me in your calculations? I’ll be heading to the castle town after this, so I have no intention of eating any pitiful, shabby cooking from the post town,” Neeya interjected with a haughty shrug. Ai Fa’s gaze grew ever chillier, while Pino broke out in an even more amused grin.

“You always do fail to woo the ladies right at the key moment, don’t you, you imbecilic minstrel.”

“Hmm? Did you say something, Pino?”

“Oh, nothing. Ugh, it’s a real pain trying to think this all through. Mister, could you put together two dishes for twelve people so that everyone would enjoy themselves?”

“Huh? You want me to do it?”

That was an unexpected proposal, but it wasn’t anything all that difficult, so I went ahead and consented.

“In that case, could you possibly bring a larger container? It would be a real pain to carry each portion of soup one by one, but everyone could just portion it out as they please from a big bowl.”

“Ah, that definitely makes sense. Sorry, Zan, but could you go fetch two pots?”

The little masked man named Zan gave an absentminded nod, thrusting the tray and plate he was holding onto the minstrel and heading back to the tent.

With that, I had now learned everyone’s names. The first girl was Pino, the minstrel Neeya, the little masked guy Zan, and the twins Arun and Amin.

“So, how much will it cost?”

“Um, it’ll be...exactly forty red coins.”

I decided to give them a bit more of the easy-to-eat giba teriyaki stew, at seven portions, and five of the giba curry. For the roast giba, giba manju, and myamuu giba, I went with four portions each. That would work out to enough

for twelve people, with the stew and curry acting as side dishes.

“That works out to about three red coins per head, huh? That’s a rather cheap price to pay to fill our stomachs.” As she spoke, Pino rummaged around in a small bag at her hip and pulled out four dull silver coins, which she held out toward me.

I tilted my head and said, “Huh?” in response to the unfamiliar shape. “Sorry, this is the first time I’ve seen coins shaped like that...”

“Ah, these are coins from Sym. I forgot to have them exchanged.”

The coins I was acquainted with were shaped like long and narrow boards, but these were round ones about the size of a five-hundred-yen coin. The writing engraved on them seemed to have lots of strange winding shapes, very different from the characters seen around Genos.

“Sorry about that. Here, these are western coins.”

“Thank you. Um... So, you do business in the eastern kingdom too?”

“Of course. There aren’t many places in this world where we haven’t set foot, Mahyudra aside.”

They made their living by traveling literally all over the place. But in this world, long journeys meant putting your life on the line. Was that how such a young girl had ended up with such a mature air about her? As I was pondering that, I went ahead and accepted her coins.

“Thank you. You can go ahead and load up on everything aside from the soup dishes for now.”

After handing the necessary amount of cooking to Pino, I gave instructions to the other stalls. Then I asked Ai Fa to give Tsuvai the sixteen and a half coins owed to the Ruu clan for the sale.

First, we placed the giba manju and myamuu giba on the tray held out by the twins. As she watched us with delight, Pino said, “They both look delicious.”

They have a really different feel about them, compared to the townsfolk, but they seem pretty nice.

At the very least, I couldn’t see anything off about Pino’s speech or conduct,

and, well, I supposed Neeya's frivolous nature had its charms. The small masked man felt a bit eerie, but Ai Fa didn't seem especially on guard around him, so he couldn't be all that dangerous. Instead, my clan head's attention seemed to be fixed entirely on Pino right from the start.

"Hey mister, did you throw out the paplua flower I gave you?"

"Huh? You mean the red flower from yesterday? No. It was pretty, so I put it up to decorate the house."

"I see. That flower is a small gift from us. If you bring it with you, you can enter our tent for free one time."

"Oh, is that so? I appreciate it."

In other words, it was a free ticket. Definitely a nice gift.

"We actually have a friend from town who's really been looking forward to your arrival, so we were planning on visiting together. Um, I believe that will probably be the day after tomorrow."

Rimee Ruu would be on duty again that day, and she had made a promise to go together with Tara then.

Pino smiled kindly in response. "I'm glad to hear it. Will you be coming during the day or at night?"

"We were planning on midday. Our friend said that you have different shows at night, and that she definitely wanted to come see your performance before that."

"Yeah, we only have the animal tamer's tricks during the day. Of course, we're proud of those too, but the night show really is the main event," Pino replied with a giggle. Really, just how old was she anyway? "Anyway, we'll be putting on a performance in the middle of the day today in order to draw in customers. It'll probably cause a good deal of noise, but we're hoping you can let it slide for the sake of both our businesses."

"All right. I'm looking forward to working next to you too," I replied, at which point the little guy, Zan, returned carrying a pair of metal pots. All the while, Neeya had been persistently talking at the current target of his affections, while

Ai Fa ignored him with a steely, expressionless look on her face.

At any rate, it seemed we were steadily growing closer with the Gamley Troupe.

2

Pino's performance to attract customers began shortly after the sun hit its peak.

"Starting today, the Gamley Troupe will be welcoming your patronage! So anyone who's not in a hurry, take your time and enjoy!" Pino called out, her voice accompanied by the lively sounds of a flute and drum.

Multiple performers now stood before the massive tent that looked like the remains of some sort of dinosaur. In the middle of the lineup were Pino and the large man. The others were standing with their backs up against the tent as they played the accompanying music. It had a really different feel compared to the festival music I knew from back in Japan, with a tune that called to mind India or Arabia more.

The voluptuous woman with long dark-brown hair wrapped up around her head was playing a side-blown flute. Meanwhile, the little masked guy, Zan, was banging away on what looked like a big conga drum. The twins Arun and Amin were twirling wooden sticks with numerous fine metal plates attached to them. Though the scritchng sound they made was unfamiliar to me, it certainly was dazzling. Even with just the four performers, their music was quite lively. And yet, something about the tone felt a bit melancholic.

The minstrel Neeya was nowhere to be seen. If he hadn't just been spouting off blatant lies earlier, perhaps he really had headed to the castle town.

At any rate, the people passing by were now stopping and staring with great interest. On top of that, they were located right in front of our place. As there was nothing but a stone-paved road around ten meters wide between us, they were completely visible from our stalls and outdoor restaurant. The eighty or so customers we currently had seated were giving some impressively enthusiastic cheers.

As those cheers washed over them, Pino and the large man took another step forward. In his arms, the big guy was holding a number of poles which were orange and straight like grigee. There were six of them, looking to be around a meter and a half long and seven to eight centimeters thick. The man tossed one of them over to Pino. She caught it and placed it over her shoulder, then started twirling and dancing to the music playing behind her. Her long braided hair and the sleeves of her outfit fluttered about, earning another cheer from the audience.

It was a gorgeous dance, with every little motion drawing the viewer's gaze. Even the customers lined up at the stalls had their eyes fixed firmly on her.

In the meantime, the large fellow was slowly moving too. He planted one of the poles he held on the surface of the road so that it stood straight up vertically as he kept it steady with a single fist.

Then, Pino suddenly turned toward him, holding the pole she had been shouldering high over her head with both hands. She took several steps back, and suddenly leaped off the ground. Her small body whirled through the air, and then she swung the pole she held down as if she were pole vaulting, lifting her even higher.

As the crowd cheered, Pino raised the pole once more. Then, the bottom of her pole collided loudly with the top of the one held by the large man. Though I couldn't explain how it worked, the two poles stuck together, leaving Pino dangling at a height of around three meters.

The crowd broke out in a round of applause. Even if there was some sort of special mechanism to allow the poles to join together, the trick would still be quite difficult to reproduce. From the stall next to me, I heard an "Ooh," of admiration from Toor Deen.

However, their performance was only just getting started.

The large man tossed another pole up to Pino, who easily snatched it from the air, supporting herself with just her other arm. Using the momentum from the throw, she lifted that pole as well and attached it to the top of the stack. Then, she started climbing it like a monkey.

Since each of those poles were one and a half meters long, that meant the

height was now four and a half meters. She was about as high as the tent's peak at this point.

The man then threw another pole up and Pino repeated the process, bringing her to a height of around six meters in the air. Steadily, shrieks started mixing in with the cheers.

Then the man threw yet another, bringing the height up to seven and a half meters. That was about as high as the roof of a two-story building. It was seriously frightening how the pole was starting to sway and bend. It wasn't even fixed to the ground. It was reliant on the big guy supporting it with just one hand.

I suddenly felt someone grab my right arm tight. When I turned to look, I found that Toor Deen had left her post and was now clinging to me, her face pale.

Shockingly enough, though, the climax was still to come.

Now there were unmistakable shrieks coming from the crowd.

Toor Deen hugged my arm even tighter too.

At a height of seven and a half meters in the air, Pino suddenly pulled herself up to stand on the end of the pole. And that wasn't all. The large man then grabbed the pole with both hands and lifted it off the ground.

Even Ai Fa couldn't help but let slip a sound of admiration. It was beyond impressive. I couldn't even begin to fathom just how perfect her sense of balance would have to be to pull off such a feat, not to mention the monstrous strength needed for all that lifting.

Then a strange sound descended on us from high above all the shrieks and exclamations of surprise. Pino had started playing a side-blown flute, joining the half-forgotten musical accompaniment.

As Pino played her music, the man shifted his right arm up the pole to a point higher than his head, then used his left arm to pull the lowest segment loose. After that, he lowered his right arm back to around the level of his chest, bringing Pino that much closer to the ground.

Using the same method, the man then pulled the second pole loose. As the third and fourth poles were removed in turn and the whole thing grew steadily shorter, Pino remained at the top, playing her flute with a composed expression.

With only one pole left, Pino took a leap while still blowing into her flute. She landed gently on the big man's right shoulder with its bulging muscles.

With that, the audience absolutely exploded with cheers. Pino gave them a bewitching smile from atop the man's shoulder.

Without even realizing it, I had started clapping myself. Of course, I wasn't really able to applaud very well with my right arm fixed in place.

"Asuta, is it over?"

"Yeah. The girl made it back down safely."

Toor Deen's eyes had been firmly shut as she clung to my arm. Once she was able to timidly will them open again and she caught sight of Pino safe and sound, the young girl breathed a sigh of relief.

Then she noticed Ai Fa staring and turned beet red before hurriedly distancing herself.

"I-I'm so sorry! I was just so scared that I couldn't help but..."

"You needn't be so flustered. That said, you aren't a young child any longer, so you shouldn't go around carelessly touching men from outside of your family."

It was true that boys and girls were treated differently starting at the age of ten, but still, Ai Fa was being so uncompromising there. Her face still deep red, Toor Deen shrank into herself as she retreated back to her post.

In the meantime, the cheers had continued to wash over Pino and the other performers. Also, the adorable twins had traded their instruments for large

thatched baskets, and were darting all about the roadway. They must have been gathering tips from the crowd.

“So that was an acrobatics performance? I see. So that’s how they earn their coins,” Ai Fa remarked.

“Yeah. It really was something.”

“Indeed. It must have required a tremendous amount of training to obtain such physical proficiency. One would need to have great pride in one’s work to be able to do that.”

Apparently, Ai Fa’s impression of the performers was on the rise. And I felt much the same way.

“That was incredible. You guys are quite the performers,” a customer from Jagar lined up at the stall cheerfully called out. At that point, one of the twins approached.

A number of our customers generously tossed some coins into the basket. And then, the child whose gender I couldn’t quite make out bowed and turned toward me.

“Um, is it okay to go over to your guest seating as well?”

Their voice was lovely, like the sound of a bell. But intuitively, I got the feeling I was dealing with a boy. Then again, as someone with a provenly terrible eye, that likely didn’t mean much. It just seemed to me that the twins were a boy and girl pair.

“Yeah, that’s totally fine. Oh, hold on a moment...”

I leaned forward and peered into the basket. It was quite the haul, but naturally, they were pretty much all red coins and half coins. Even the fourth-size coins that I didn’t ever use were mixed in there.

In order to show my appreciation, I went ahead and added a full red coin. The boy then gave me a very grateful bow.

“Take care with the customers who are drinking fruit wine, okay? And hey, are you Arun or Amin?”

“I’m Arun...” the boy replied in a feeble voice before almost fleeing. Shy kids

could be awfully cute, I thought. I was really fond of Toor Deen, after all.

“That was amazing! I’ve never seen a performance like that!” Myme called out from two stalls over. She had once again opened for business around forty to fifty minutes later than we did.

“From what I’ve been told, that troupe came for last year’s revival festival too, but you didn’t see them then?”

“No! I was never able to come out to the post town back then,” Myme replied, a sparkle in her eyes that showed how much she was enjoying herself. “Just what sort of performances do they put on in that tent, I wonder? I would really love to find out!”

“Do you want to come along with us? We’re planning to go with Tara the day after tomorrow.”

“Huh? Hmm, I’d like to go, of course...but I shouldn’t go spending money all on my own like that...”

“I’m sure Mikel would give you his permission. And even if he doesn’t, you could have my free invite.”

“Thank you!” Myme replied with a beaming smile. Energetic and carefree girls could be just as charming as the shy ones.

After some time had passed, the sound of the traveling performers’ instruments started moving south. They must have been planning to advertise where it was even more crowded.

Meanwhile, their tent seemed to have opened for business at the same time as that performance. The entrance that had been closed in the morning was now open wide, with customers heading in from time to time.

From what I was told, the animal tamer performed during the day, but I had no idea what sort of performance it was. At any rate, my expectations had really been raised since the morning when I first met Pino and company.

3

After that, we finished our work without any significant incidents.

Our cooking sold smoothly too. All we had left were two servings of giba manju and five myamuu giba.

“With the way things are going, it seems likely that we won’t have enough meals soon. In which case, would you have a problem with us handling things like we discussed earlier?” Reina Ruu asked while cleaning up the stalls.

“That sounds good. It would be smart to not push yourselves with the giba manju and giba burgers, and instead just increase the amount you make of the dishes that are easier to prepare. We have our hands full with the more difficult recipes, after all.”

“That would be a big help,” Reina Ruu replied, but she looked rather down.

“What’s the matter? Is something else worrying you?”

“No, it’s just...Myme’s cooking was so amazing. I can’t help but think that the food I make is inadequate, compared to hers...”

“Huh? That’s not true at all. Your new teriyaki stew sold out even quicker than your giba hot pot stew, right? Yang was really surprised by how skilled you were when he tasted it.”

“But which do you think is tastier, our stew or Myme’s karon milk dish?” Reina Ruu asked, her expression deadly serious. I had to answer her honestly.

“Hmm... In terms of how complete the dishes feel at present, Myme’s would probably come out on top. But I’d say that simply means you still have room to grow. I’d imagine your teriyaki stew will become even tastier as you get more used to making it.”

“Are you saying the flavoring and cooking process is still lacking?”

“I suppose you could put it that way if you wanted to. But it’s incredibly delicious already,” I stated, stopping my cleanup work as I faced Reina Ruu directly. “Let me ask you the same question. Which do *you* think is tastier? My roast giba or Myme’s dish?”

“That’s...” Reina Ruu hesitated. “I think your roast giba is delicious, of course...but Myme’s dish surprised me more.”

“Right? But still, in my opinion, my roast giba is just as worthy as Myme’s dish

as a product to be sold. After all, our customers have really been enjoying these meat-centric dishes, the roast giba and giba steak. Personally, I want to keep working to polish the skills I need and become a chef who won't fall behind Myme. I don't think it's good to fixate too much on what's right in front of you now and let it shake you up."

After staying silent for a bit, Reina Ruu nodded and replied, "I see. I'm sorry. It seems I've been showing my weakness at every turn... I must be even more timid than Sheera Ruu."

"That's not true at all. I really hate to lose at my core, so I can definitely understand how you feel."

Reina Ruu gave a bashful smile. It was a wonderfully charming expression that suited her perfectly.

Then, a voice called out, "Asuta." When I turned to look, I found the two Zaza women standing there with Lem Dom. It was the older woman, Mei Jeen Zaza, who had addressed me. "We have carefully observed the actions of the Fa and Ruu clans with our own eyes. We will return today to the northern settlement in order to fully convey to our clan head what we saw and felt."

"I see. Well then, please take care."

Mei Jeen and Sufira Zaza were both staring at me and Reina Ruu with terribly intense gazes. Beside them, Lem Dom just shrugged.

"I'll talk to Deek too, just like I promised Donda Ruu. If fate allows, we may meet again, Ai Fa and Asuta."

"All right. Regardless of the results, I'll be praying that the two of you can reach an understanding."

Ai Fa also gave a silent nod. Would Lem Dom be able to live as a hunter under the Dom clan despite being a woman? That was what she would be discussing with the head of the main house, Deek Dom. It really was anyone's call whether this would be a long farewell to Lem Dom or if we would see her again tomorrow after she left the Dom.

"Oh, are you already done working for today?" another voice chimed in. This time, though, I could tell it was Pino without even turning to look.

“Ah, yes. Your performance before was amazing. I’m looking forward to the day after tomorrow even more now.”

“Glad to hear it. We got a lecture from the guards not to do anything *too* dangerous, though,” Pino remarked, sticking her tongue out a bit. It was a very childish expression for her. And yet, I still didn’t feel that I could treat her like a kid. Not at all. “But, well, we let them know in no uncertain terms that we’re not that incompetent. More importantly, thanks for that amazing food earlier. It was so delicious that there was a real scramble at the end to grab the last of it. If we don’t go up to three servings for each of us next time, we could end up seeing some bloodshed.”

“Ah ha ha, thanks for saying so.”

“You really are quite the chef. It was definitely worth coming all the way here to Genos,” Pino said, looking over us as we cleaned up. “So, you’re already heading back? In that case, care to have a little fun first? Doga’s putting on a contest of strength over there right now.”

“A contest of strength?”

Now that she mentioned it, there had been a crowd gathered in front of the tent for a while now. The head of the large guy from before was just barely visible above the crowd, so I couldn’t tell what was going on over there at all.

“It’s a tug-of-war using poles. Doga holds two of them, and the audience tries to pull them in the other direction. However many people want to join in, they can all go at the same time. Anyone taking the challenge pays a half coin, and if you pull Doga over, everyone gets ten times that back.”

So were those the same poles used in the act before? If that was the case, quite a few people could join in at once. And yet, I still couldn’t imagine that mountain of a man losing.

“You hunters from the forest’s edge are real strong, right? In that case, maybe one of you could bring Doga down on your own,” Pino said, her eyes drifting away from me over to the side. Her gaze fell on Ludo Ruu, who had been chatting with Ama Min Rutim.

“Ooh, a contest of strength with that big guy? Sounds interesting.”

“Ludo Ruu,” Ai Fa quietly called out.

Turning her way, Ludo Ruu gave a cheerful wink. “In that case, we’ve got the perfect hunter for the job. Hey, where’s Ji Maam?”

“What is it? Some sort of trouble?” a voice called back as a huge figure appeared from behind the wagon.

“Apparently, they’re holding a contest of strength with that guy from town. And we were told that maybe we people of the forest’s edge could win, so why don’t you give it a shot?”

“Oh?” Ji Maam replied, a shine in his eyes as he looked down at Pino. “You’re that girl who put on that fantastic performance before. So you must be talking about that man who’s even bigger than I am?”

“That’s right. You certainly do have a fine build, even if you are smaller than Doga,” Pino replied with a grin.

“Very well,” Ji Maam said with a deep nod. “I must admit that I’m rather curious to find out just how strong that man is. I am the eldest son of the Maam clan, Ji Maam, and if you do not mind, I would like to challenge him.”

“Then it’s decided. In that case, come on over this way.”

This was kind of a strange development. Still, the other guy was the bigger of the two, surprisingly enough, so a loss wouldn’t bring any shame on the people of the forest’s edge. I followed behind the two of them, the man and the girl with such a height difference that it seemed like a joke, along with Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, and a similarly interested Lem Dom.

“There shouldn’t be any issues this way, right?” Ludo Ruu remarked as we walked along, and Ai Fa nodded back.

“Indeed.”

As they didn’t say anything further, I went ahead and asked, “What are you two talking about?”

“Hmm? Well, since we’re dealing with someone who prides himself on his strength, he’d feel ashamed if he lost to someone as small as me, right? So that’s why I’m letting Ji Maam handle it instead.”

“Y-You’re saying you could beat that massive guy, Ludo Ruu?”

“Of course. It’s a tug-of-war with a pole, right? Hunters of the forest’s edge all play that game with firewood as kids, y’know.”

Ai Fa nodded in response to Ludo Ruu’s comment. “Such a match isn’t decided by strength alone. So long as they have a good understanding of that fact, none of us would lose to someone from town.”

“But I’m not completely sure how it’ll play out with Ji Maam. He only ever tries to use pure strength, so it could end up being a good match, don’t you think?” Ludo Ruu commented.

That was seriously astounding to hear.

Meanwhile, Lem Dom was wearing a combative smile beside me. “I’d love to challenge him myself, honestly. But that seems like it would make you angry, Ai Fa, so I guess I had better not.”

“Of course you shouldn’t. You mustn’t go around causing unnecessary quarrels with the townsfolk.”

The sound of men crying out, “Aah!” suddenly overlapped with their chatter.

And then, there was a loud round of cheers.

That big guy, Doga, had taken down six whole men.

Sure enough, they were using those poles from the performance, which were around a meter and a half long. Doga was holding one in each hand as he bowed to the group of challengers.

He really was unbelievably huge. He looked to be around half a head taller than Ji Maam, somewhere in the range of two meters and ten to twenty centimeters. His whole body was coated in muscles that were like stone, and his frame was incredibly broad and thick. It was as if I were looking at a huge grizzly bear that had shed its pelt.

His head was shaved clean, and the blue eyes beneath his prominent eyebrows had a muted shine. He had a big aquiline nose, thick lips, angular cheekbones, and a square jaw. It all added up to a guy who looked like a massive, stern stone giant, the sort that would make a kid cry to look at.

His skin was also so deeply tanned that I couldn't tell what its original color had been. Though I wondered if he perhaps had blood from Mahyudra in him, I naturally kept that question to myself.

"Doga, this fine hunter here says he'll play with you. And he's asking for a one-on-one bout."

The big guy, Doga, slowly turned to face Ji Maam. His eyes looked void of emotion, almost like an animal's.

The arrival of a hunter from the forest's edge caused a stir to ripple through the crowd.

"Youngest son of the Ruu, would you hold on to my hunter's cloak and blade?"

"Sure. Give it your all, Ji Maam."

Ji Maam nodded and then stood in front of Doga. The performer really was a whole size bigger. To a weakling like me, it looked like a clash between two giant monsters.

"Ah, would you mind paying us a half coin, O hunter of the forest's edge? If you win, you'll get ten times that back."

"I don't have any coins," Ji Maam muttered, and then he went to remove his hunter's necklace. He took a single tusk from it and tossed it into the basket on the ground. "That would sell for three red coins. Does that work?"

"Yes, of course. If you lose, we'll give you two and a half red coins back." Pino looked terribly amused at seeing just how this would play out. "Now then, could you enter that ring there? If you step out of the ring or fall down, you lose."

There was a red ring around one meter in diameter on the road. Looking closely, it seemed to be made with a dyed straw rope. Doga was standing in a separate red ring of his own.

Silently, Ji Maam stepped inside the ring as he was instructed. Doga tossed one of the poles he was holding aside and thrust out the remaining one. The Maam hunter casually grabbed hold of the other end.

"Well then, begin!"

The band consisting of the twins, the beautiful woman, and the little guy started playing a stirring tune. At the same time, the two massive men immediately began pulling on the wooden pole.

What a truly stupendous game of tug-of-war... The muscles on the arms and shoulders of both participants were bulging impressively. It felt as if the stone-paved ground under their feet would start to crack under the pressure.

In the face of that tremendous strength, the pole started to creak pathetically. I had trouble picturing this ending in any other way than with the pole up and snapping.

With their waists lowered and both hands gripping the pole, neither of the two budged. They really were competing with pure strength. Both were monsters. Ji Maam for not losing to this mountain of a man, and Doga for not letting a hunter of the forest's edge take him down.

And then, around a minute later, it suddenly came to an end.

With his feet digging hard into the ground, Ji Maam let out an earth-trembling bellow and suddenly yanked the pole his way.

Doga lost his balance, and with a tremendous thud he fell on the stone-paved road.

Instantly, cheers erupted.

"We have a winner! Amin, please give the challenger five red coins."

The twin who I felt was most likely a girl continued to play her musical stick as she reached into the basket, taking out the giba tusk and five red coins. Then she very timidly held them out toward Ji Maam.

"Hey, that tusk was offered in place of a half coin, right? If you're returning it, then you only need to give me four and a half red coins."

"Ah, I-I'm so sorry..."

Amin replaced one of the red coins with a half coin in a fluster. As he wiped the sweat from his brow, Ji Maam accepted them, and then turned his gaze toward Doga.

"I've never met someone from town as strong as you are. You must have

done quite a bit of training.”

“For my part, it has been several years now since I last fell in a one-on-one challenge...”

While he had a voice that was just as deep as Ji Maam’s, Doga was surprisingly polite when he spoke. Though I had found his eyes beastly and impossible to read, they now showed a clear respect for Ji Maam. The people in the audience who had watched the bout shouted out once more.

“That’s a hunter of the forest’s edge for you! He was really something else, taking down a guy that size all on his own!”

“All right, let’s give it a try too!”

As new challengers came forward, our group went ahead and stepped away.

As we did, Pino hurried over to join us.

“Thanks, mister. We won’t get any challengers if he doesn’t lose now and then, but Doga doesn’t have it in him to throw a bout on purpose, so you were a big help,” she said quietly, breaking out in a grin. “Still, you hunters of the forest’s edge really are incredible. What an impressive show of strength. Does it come from eating giba every single day?”

“You certainly are interested in us people of the forest’s edge for an outsider, girl,” Ai Fa calmly commented.

“Of course I am,” Pino replied, turning toward my clan head with a beautiful smile. “From what I’ve been told, you secluded yourselves deep in the forest up until very recently, but now you sell meals made with giba in town, *and* you made a huge stir all throughout Genos by taking down some corrupt nobles. I’ve really been looking forward to seeing just what sort of people you are myself.”

“Hmm. So the stories are being told outside of Genos as well?”

“Yeah. We actually got to hear the details from an old acquaintance.”

“An old acquaintance?” Ai Fa repeated, furrowing her brow.

Pino’s eyes narrowed even further in amusement. “A bodyguard by the name of Kamyua Yoshu. We ran into him in a rural post town around the end of the

black month. He sure had a lot to tell us about all of you.”

I was certain that not a single one of us had expected that man’s name to come up when she said it.

As she watched our reaction, Pino let out a laugh from the back of her throat and then casually turned around.

“We’ll be staying here in Genos until the end of the festival. I’m looking forward to continuing to work alongside you. Well then, take care...”

4

Business went smoothly the next day as well.

The number of customers we got was going up by the day, and for the first time we managed to completely sell out of every last one of our dishes.

Things were also going well for Myme, as she had increased her number of meals to sixty, yet still sold out in less than an hour. Since she was preparing everything all on her own, it wasn’t easy for her to keep raising her numbers, but she still returned to the Turan lands with an energetic smile on her face that said she was prepared to give her absolute all.

The Westerly Wind had finally opened their stall as well, and based on my recommendation, they had decided to sell okonomiyaki. Before this, I had given up on trying to serve it out of a stall, since it was difficult to eat if you had to hold it in your hands, but that was solved by adding something that would have to be prepared in advance—a separate piece of thin poitan bread. Both the poitan and the freshly-made poitan okonomiyaki with its hearty helping of fillings were circular in shape and around the same size. The dish would be presented with the poitan wrapped around the outside.

Okonomiyaki was a popular dish at The Westerly Wind at the moment, and that popularity didn’t fall off in the least for their stall. The use of white mamaria vinegar in mayonnaise had caused a stir at the dinner party at the forest’s edge the other day, and it seemed to have improved the reputation of okonomiyaki even further in general. For fillings, they went simple with just rib meat and tino, but the tau oil-based pseudo-Worcestershire sauce and

mayonnaise added plenty of flavor and must have tasted quite novel to the townsfolk.

They also set their prices on the low side, so their okonomiyaki cost one and a half red coins. Though they had to keep the amount of giba meat down at ninety grams as a result, they used plenty of poitan and tino in exchange, making for a dish that felt like it was worth two full red coins. As such, it was especially welcomed by folks who were shorter on cash.

“Yup. My old man won’t be able to complain about this! He’ll be shocked to hear they all sold out!” Yumi told us later on, having been placed in charge of the okonomiyaki stall.

She didn’t have any bodyguards, unlike our group or Myme, and the only person working the stall with her was one of her female friends. As she was born and raised in the less affluent parts of the post town, Yumi had no fear of outsiders or ruffians at all.

The Westerly Wind would be able to use any leftover okonomiyaki batter in the evening, so Yumi had felt free to start with a full fifty meals on the first day, only to end up selling them all and closing even quicker than we did.

Myme had sold all sixty of her meals, Yumi sold fifty, and we ran out of all of ours too, adding up to nine hundred and seventy giba meals sold in total. Even taking into account that most customers had ordered two different dishes, that was still nearly five hundred people. It was undeniably a spectacular feat.

Thirty of those meals had been ordered by the Gamley Troupe alone. Just as they had said they would yesterday, they had upped their order of giba cooking by enough for three more people, from twelve up to fifteen.

It was possible that Neeya had slipped away, as it was that bewitching woman who played the flute who was helping to pick up the food instead. She was truly beautiful, with her slightly darker skin tone. The fabric she wore had mysterious Sym-styled patterns embroidered into it, and even though she wasn’t actually showing that much skin, she was still exceedingly sensual. Apparently, her name was Nachara.

Around the time the sun hit its peak, the Gamley Troupe once again started putting on a performance in front of the tent to attract customers. For today’s

show, the small guy, Zan, brought out some daggers, which he threw into a target Pino was holding out from a distance of several meters. As a result, Toor Deen ended up clinging to my arm once again.

One other interesting thing that happened was that the star reader who resided in the castle town, Arishuna, stopped by our stalls for the first time in a while. She had on a leather traveler's cloak to avoid drawing attention, and when she arrived, she greeted me by saying, "It's been some time, Asuta," without removing her hood.

"Oh, Arishuna. It really has been a while."

I hadn't seen her since the noblewomen's tea party. And now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen Polarth or Diel in a while either. Everyone really was busy with their own work.

"Your shop, is doing very well. I hardly, recognize it, since last time."

"Yeah, that's thanks to the revival festival. Did you come out of your way to stop by for a meal, Arishuna?"

"Yes. Polarth said, you were selling, your dish, with the herbs."

Polarth hadn't stopped by the stalls, but he must have been receiving detailed reports from Yang. Arishuna had once come to The Sledgehammer with Polarth, where she was able to have some giba curry, and she had seemed like she was quite taken with it.

However, today I had to apologize to her. "Oh, I'm so sorry, but giba curry is only sold every third day. Today, we're selling a different dish instead."

Toor Deen's stall was currently selling giba and nanaar carbonara. It was one of the dishes I was particularly proud of, prepared with a cream made using kimyuus egg and karon milk. I had wanted to add bacon to it as well, but that would have really brought up the price, so I had gone with giba rib meat instead. At first, I had considered going with the pasta and meat sauce I had fed to Yumi and our other guests in the forest's edge, but the combination of the tarapa-based sauce and the minced meat might have been a little too similar to the giba burgers, so we went with this recipe instead.

Genos had a surprisingly large number of ingredients that were close to what

would normally be used in Italian cooking, so it was no issue at all preparing carbonara. Reten oil that was like olive oil, myamuu that was like garlic, pico leaves that were like black pepper, gyama dried milk that was like camembert cheese, kimyuus eggs that were like chicken eggs, and karon milk that was similar to a cow's milk... Yes, with all those different ingredients, it really was no problem at all. Oh, and I used the spinach-like nanaar because people tended to avoid dishes without any vegetables in them here in Genos.

Furthermore, in order to help it keep better, we were using dried pasta rather than fresh. It had a good bit of chewiness to it when made this way, and I didn't feel that either was any better or worse in terms of taste.

Even so, it took a lot of planning to figure out how to make it at a stall. That was because boiling the pasta and then cooking it afterward required two different heat sources. We ended up solving the problem by having someone make a new work surface for us, designed to allow us to have two braziers in the stall heating two separate pots at the same time.

Toor Deen was to be the one actually preparing it rather than me, so I had ordered a cooking hourglass as part of the setup, just like the one Varkas had used in the kitchen back in the castle town. So long as she had that to help her measure the proper amount of time to cook the pasta, there wouldn't be anything to worry about. After just a few days of training, she was able to prepare the carbonara without any issue.

It was earning a lot of praise at the moment. After all, townsfolk weren't used to noodle dishes in general here in Genos. That meant Toor Deen was continuously busy boiling up pasta, as it was every bit as popular as the giba curry.

The dish was sold for one and a half red coins. It used ninety grams of meat and fifty to sixty grams of pasta for a half-sized serving. I went with a higher ratio of meat in order to match the tastes of folks from Genos, but it was primarily a carbohydrate dish, so a lot of customers ordered it with the giba hot pot stew or the twice-cooked giba from the rotating specials.

Speaking of the twice-cooked giba, I didn't have any seasoning to use in place of doubanjiang, so instead I had prepared a sweet and spicy sauce made from

tau oil, sugar, myamuu, and chitt seeds. We had boiled the giba rib meat back home in advance, and then sautéed it on site with some tino, pula, aria, and the pseudo-brown beech mushroom. It had ended up being as popular as the giba steak and roast giba.

“So, unfortunately we don’t have any giba curry to serve you, but this dish is very popular...” I started to say, only to hold my tongue. While her slender face remained expressionless, Arishuna had suddenly stumbled. “Wh-What’s the matter? Are you not feeling well?”



“No... I was just shocked, to hear you weren’t selling, that herb dish,” Arishuna replied in an emotionless voice, having managed to catch herself. Her eyes like a calm nighttime lake stared intently at my face. “It is forbidden, for a star reader, to read their own fate.”

“H-Huh? What?”

“I was unable, to predict, this ill omen. Yet that, is also fate.”

“Um, I don’t really understand what you’re trying to say...”

“I was terribly looking forward, to that herb dish.”

Was it just the pure shock from hearing we weren’t selling the giba curry?

“Um, if you’re looking for giba curry, they should be selling it right now at The Sledgehammer and the other inns...”

“I was looking forward, to the herb dish, you prepared, Asuta.”

At this point, all I did was sell the curry base, while each inn prepared the dish on their own. The Sledgehammer added chitt seeds for spiciness, while The Great Southern Tree used a lot of sugar and tau oil, so each place offered their own unique take.

“I-In that case, I believe the giba curry prepared at The Kimyuus’s Tail is closest to the dish I make...”

However, Arishuna shook her head. “I was looking forward, to the herb dish, you prepared, Asuta.”

It was true that the giba curry on offer at The Kimyuus’s Tail wasn’t completely identical to my version of the dish. I used ramam fruit and panam honey to aim for a flavor that was extravagant, yet also mellow.

Arishuna deeply hung her head and turned to leave.

“My apologies. My mind is set, so I will, leave for today.”

“U-Um, we’ll be selling the giba curry again two days from now!”

“I am becoming, very busy... Most likely, I will not be able, to leave the castle town, before the revival festival, is over.” Though she remained perfectly expressionless, there was still a clear aura of sadness hanging about Arishuna’s

slender figure. It felt like if I let her head back to the castle town in that state, she would end up collapsing in the street before she made it to the gates.

“I-In that case, what if we have someone deliver it?”

Arishuna suddenly stopped in place, her impossible-to-read gaze darting toward me from under her hood.

“A man named Yang who works as the head chef for the house of Daleim currently comes to the post town each day for work. Wouldn’t it be possible to have the dish delivered to you through him?”

With that, Arishuna headed back to the stall without making a sound.

“The head Daleim chef, made that minmi sweet, for the tea party, correct? That man, is here, in the post town?”

“Yeah. We’ve been having him be our go-between with Polarth lately, so if we can hand him the dish...”

Arishuna brought her fingers together in a complex manner, and her mysterious eyes disappeared behind their lids. “I offer my gratitude, to Sym... When will that, be possible?”

“If you need it, we could get it to you tomorrow.”

With her eyes still closed, Arishuna gave a deep bow. “You have, my gratitude as well, Asuta. How can I possibly, repay this debt?”

“All you need to do is pay the normal price. If there’s anyone you should thank, it would be Yang,” I replied, smiling at Arishuna’s overblown reaction. “Still, I think the giba curry on offer at The Sledgehammer would be better suited to eastern tastes. My version has a milder spiciness.”

“Spiciness is not, the whole of the taste. I wish to eat, your cooking, Asuta.”

I just hoped that I could measure up to those unreasonable expectations.

Ultimately, Arishuna ended up buying just a giba manju and then headed back to the castle town.

And so, the eighteenth of the violet month passed by peacefully.



The next day, the nineteenth of the violet month, had arrived.

Once again, business ended up going smoothly.

For today's special menu, it was finally time for the giba cutlets. I ended up preparing a hundred of them, fried not in reten oil but in giba lard instead.

Fried foods were out of style in the castle town, but considering that you couldn't even get ahold of reten oil until recently, they would have been unusual to see in any case. It ended up being even more popular than the other dishes that had been offered so far, and even though it took a while to prepare on the spot, it still sold out quicker than any other dish.

Our shop had once offered giba cutlet sandwiches, but the freshly fried cutlets themselves were almost dangerously tasty. We offered a 120-gram size with nenon, ma pula, and shredded tino for two red coins. For flavoring, I smeared around half of it with the pseudo-Worcestershire sauce, and for the other half I used the juice from a lemon-like sheel.

"Ah, this is incredibly tasty!"

Dora stopped by first thing in the morning once again, with his voice getting the chatter going around the outdoor restaurant. The cutlets were popular enough that I wanted to make them a part of the regular menu, but they took a while to prepare and it was pretty tough getting ahold of the necessary lard as well. As such, it would be nearly impossible to prepare a hundred of them every day. But I figured it was just fine selling them once every five days during the revival festival.

The other dishes, including the ones from Myme and The Westerly Wind, all sold out completely too. There were still three days left until the revival festival kicked off properly with the day of dawn, and it was seeming like it might be good to start increasing the number of servings of soup offered by the Ruu clan beginning tomorrow.

"All right, now we're all done for today!" Rimee Ruu declared after cleaning up, having been in a good mood ever since morning. That was because today we would finally be entering the Gamley Troupe's tent.

We had invited anyone who might have been interested, and among the

chefs from the forest's edge, Rimee Ruu, Ama Min Rutim, and myself would be attending. That was fewer than I had expected, but it was probably because using coins for entertainment like this wasn't looked upon all too kindly at the forest's edge. Still, depending on our impressions, I could definitely see Yun Sudra and Reina Ruu being interested later.

As for our guards, they included Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, and Dan Rutim, and we were accompanied by Tara, Yumi, and Myme from the Genos side. In total, that made for a group of nine.

"All right, we'll be heading home now. Take care of everyone, Ludo," Reina Ruu stated before she returned to the forest's edge along with three of the wagons.

There were six of us remaining here, and since Dan Rutim had come to town with the Rutim clan's tolos, Mim Cha, we wouldn't have any difficulties making our way back. We entrusted Gilulu, Mim Cha, and a wagon to The Kimyuus's Tail, then met up with Tara en route before heading into the Gamley Troupe's tent.

"Yumi, have you seen the inside before?"

"Yeah, at last year's revival festival. I think the last time before that was around five years ago? It was a really interesting show, so I don't think I'd get bored of it even if I saw it every single year," Yumi said, but then she brought her face in closer to mine. "But there's one thing I find kinda mysterious."

"Hmm? What's that?"

"You know that little acrobat girl? I'm pretty sure last year and five years ago too, she was already there just like she is now."

"Hmm? She must have been really young five years ago."

"No, that's not it. I'm saying that girl looked exactly like she does now even back that far."

For some reason, I felt a chill run down my spine. "B-But no matter how you look at her, she's around twelve or thirteen, right? Her appearance would have to change at least a little over the course of five years, wouldn't it?"

“That’s why I said it was mysterious. Maybe she’s a younger sister with an identical face or something.”

In that case, wouldn’t there be an elder sister who looked a lot like her among the rest of the troupe? At least for now, I couldn’t recall having seen anyone like that.

While we were having that conversation, we had arrived at the northern extreme of the stall area, where that huge tent that looked like a dinosaur’s remains stood. There was a small kiosk with a curtain by the entrance.

“Is that where we pay?”

Nobody knew the answer, so Ai Fa accompanied me as I peered inside.

“Thank you for coming... You can sit there,” a low, hoarse voice called out from the dimly lit interior.

Awaiting us there was an old man with an unusual appearance. This was a different person from the one who had been guiding the large lizards on the first day, though. He had on a dark-gray hooded cloak that looked like something a wizard would wear, and had a vacant gaze.

“Hmm... What a dazzling light... You possess a truly strong star... This is the mountain constellation, and the cat’s eye star...”

“Ah, no, we’re here for the tent there.”

It seemed that the old man was blind. His eyes were white and cloudy, and didn’t seem to have any point of focus. Furthermore, there were strange swirling patterns drawn on his thin face. Their design might have been called tribal back in my old world.

“This is the star reader’s booth. Guests for the tent should continue on inside,” the old man said, but then his pattern-coated face turned my way. “Oh...? I can sense two people there... Who are you, exactly?”

“Ah, we’re people of the forest’s edge,” I replied.

“People of the forest’s edge...” the man repeated, and then he held his tongue.

Not understanding what had just happened at all, we went ahead and exited

back out through the curtain. When we did, we found both our group and the black-haired Pino standing there waiting.

“You came just as you promised. Welcome, everyone from the forest’s edge.”

It had already been four days since we had first met, so I had grown rather accustomed to her unusual appearance. However, there really was something about her that just made you feel on guard, and then there was what Yumi had said too. Speaking of Yumi, she wasn’t even trying to hide her curiosity as she looked Pino over intently.

“That’s Old Man Rai’s fortune telling booth. Did you have him read some sort of fortune for you?”

“Ah, no, we wandered inside because we thought it was where we were supposed to pay.”

“My apologies for the confusion. Allow me to show you the way.”

With her furisode-like outfit fluttering along as she went, Pino walked over to the tent’s entrance, which was like the pitch-black mouth of a monster gaping wide.

Stepping inside, we found that, sure enough, it was as dark as night all around. Once my eyes had finally grown accustomed to the darkness, though, I could vaguely make out a figure ahead of us.

“Good work, Dilo. I’ve brought along a group.”

The man Pino had addressed must have been over 180 centimeters tall, and though it was hard to tell with the baggy robe he had on, he looked to be quite slim. On top of that, he had an expressionless face like a noh mask, so if it wasn’t for his skin color, I would have figured he was an easterner.

He wore something like a turban wrapped around his head, with long blackish-brown hair spilling out from underneath. It really was impossible to tell the ages of the people in the troupe. I got the sense that he wasn’t particularly young, but I couldn’t even begin to hazard a guess as to how old he was.

“Young children can pay half price—so, a half coin—while for everyone else it will be a red coin...”

“Oh, I’ll be turning ten, so how much should I pay?” Myme asked, to which the tall man, Dilo, gave a deep bow.

“If you are exactly ten, I must ask for a full red coin...”

We quickly paid the required amount, with Tara and I presenting paplua flowers to him for free entry. Strangely enough, even after four days, the flowers still hadn’t wilted and looked quite lively even now. Perhaps they were actually artificial.

“Well then, please come this way.”

With that, Pino pulled open a curtain hanging behind Dilo. This time, there was a small amount of light shining through.

“Ooh, so that’s how it was constructed?” I remarked in admiration without thinking.

On the other side of the curtain, you could see a thicket of trees spreading out under the roof.

The stall areas had been created by clearing all the trees in an expanse around five meters wide along the side of the road. Since this tent was big enough to take up the space of ten stalls...I estimated that at the very least it had to cover a diameter of twenty meters. That meant that past those first five meters, it was stretching out over the thicket. One of the reasons the tent appeared so misshapen from the outside might have been the tree branches pushing up against it.

Our present location put us at the leftmost edge of that huge tent. Along the wall to our left, there were a number of windows letting in a bit of the early afternoon sunlight. Meanwhile, on our right side, there was an inner curtain standing around two meters high, creating a sort of passage around three meters wide. That said, however, it *was* a path through a thicket. A number of trees stood before us, irregularly spaced out, blocking our vision. Even if there was only one way to go, it still gave off the impression of a mysterious labyrinth.

“Whoa, what a strange feeling! It’s like we’re out in the forest when it’s turning dark,” Rimee Ruu excitedly said while holding hands with Tara.

We started walking forward, only to be seriously surprised by the sound of

wings flapping overhead.

“Ooh, what’s that bird?! How strange!” Dan Rutim called out, sounding every bit as excited as Rimee Ruu. There was indeed a wondrous bird perched atop the nearest tree. It was around the size of a chicken and had seven-colored wings with red as the primary base, giving it a truly gorgeous appearance.

It had a small head and a long neck. Its plumage called to mind a crown. With eyes as piercing as a hawk’s, it looked down at us suspiciously.

“That’s a raioh bird. They normally live at the southern end of Jagar. They’re also known as the seven-colored flame.”

“It’s truly beautiful! Yes, just lovely. But it doesn’t look all that tasty!” Dan Rutim declared.

“How perceptive. The seven-colored plumage itself can be sold for a silver coin, but the meat is supposed to be inedible and have a terrible stench,” Pino laughed back. “Ah, allow me to warn you in advance. Take care not to touch any of the animals in here. They’re all good, well-behaved creatures, but you could end up having a nasty experience if you touch them carelessly.”

“Yes, those are the eyes of a meat eater. It seems like it would be quite difficult to hunt without a bow wielded by someone like Ludo Ruu!”

“When you’re ready, please continue forward. If I lead you the whole way, it won’t be as fun, so I’ll keep to the back of the line and explain things as we go.”

And so, we timidly advanced onward. Just to be safe, Ludo Ruu took the lead, followed by Rimee Ruu and Tara, then Ai Fa and I were right in the middle, and the remaining members of our group followed behind us with Dan Rutim taking up the rear. We passed under the raioh bird, which just sat and stared as we continued down the passage. Due to the poor visibility, we needed to be careful as we walked along.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Ludo Ruu asked.

“Ooh, how cute! What kind of animal is this?!” Rimee Ruu chimed in. However, since the animal they had spotted was apparently on the ground, I couldn’t see it from my position.

As our group moved along, there were further exclamations of “ooh” and “ah!” Once they had advanced a little more, Ludo and Rimee Ruu turned and looked back at us with curiosity-filled eyes.

Finally, Ai Fa and I caught sight of that new animal. From what I could tell, it seemed to be some sort of turtle.

“Ah, the giant Sym turtle. Easterners refer to it by the odd name of gyuroreekeh muuwa.”

It had about a one-meter-long shell, which was an inconspicuous shade of brown and had pointy spikes like those of an alligator snapping turtle. Its neck and limbs were sturdy, to the point that the beast gave off the impression of a heavy tank. To anyone who wasn’t familiar with turtles, it must have looked like some sort of frightening monster.

“That guy could easily bite off a finger if you make him mad, so be sure to take care.” As Pino spoke, the turtle slowly moved back into hiding in the greenery. “Now, this is where the show really begins.”

A moment later, Rimee Ruu cheered, “Wow!”

Instantly, Ai Fa reached for the handle of her blade, her blue eyes blazing in the dim light.

“Whoa, that’s...” Ludo Ruu said, at a loss for words.

We hurried forward through the thicket. Ludo and Rimee Ruu had already reached the end of the passage. The space extended to the right here, which allowed the rest of the group that was trailing behind to come up and see the animal side by side.

“You aren’t in any danger, so please remain calm and refrain from drawing your blade.”

There were ropes hanging in a mesh pattern around the space, forming a large uneven net that looked like a human head could just barely fit through the gaps, which meant we were able to take in the frightening sight of the creature without any issues.

A gigantic beast was hiding up in a roughly three-meter-tall tree. It had jet-

black fur that looked quite stiff, and was even bigger than Dan Rutim.

Its head was large and seemed distorted somehow. Its arms were long and even thicker than a human leg, while its short legs were only around half as large, and its torso was thick like a barrel. It was a large monkey of some sort, but it wasn't a gorilla or an orangutan.

The tough-looking fur coating its body covered everything except its face, chest, and fingers, where its bluish-black skin was exposed. It had jutting eyebrows, a smooshed nose, a huge mouth, and sagging cheeks. Its eyes glowed red in the dim light as it looked disinterestedly down at us.

"Young miss, is that perhaps a black ape from Jagar?" Dan Rutim asked, sounding a bit more serious than usual.

"Once again, very perceptive of you," Pino replied, clapping her hands. "This is a black vamda ape, which lives along the border between Jagar and Sym."

"I knew it. Our forefathers hunted these apes in the black forest of Jagar."

That bit of history had immediately come to mind for me too. Before I realized it, I had a cold sweat running down my back.

"I had assumed that they had died out along with the black forest itself... Still, aren't they supposed to be vicious man-eating beasts?" Dan Rutim continued.

"Yes, which means it takes a beast tamer of exceptional skill to make one behave itself," Pino said with a little laugh. "But this black ape in particular has been a member of our troupe since it was even smaller than I am. I've heard that a beast that has tasted the flesh of humans will never grow attached to people, but I'm pretty sure this one has never done any such thing."

"I see. He does have a gentle-looking face," Dan Rutim remarked, sounding deeply impressed as he stroked his chin.

Pino broke out in a grin as she looked up at him. "Dear guest, are you fond of frightening displays?"

"Hmm? We hunters of the forest's edge fear nothing, young miss."

"That may be true for the hunters among you. In that case, how about a bit of a performance for the frail young ladies? Go ahead and try reaching your hand

through the net just a bit.”

Before anyone could stop him, Dan Rutim asked, “Like this?” and put his left fist through to the other side of the net.

Instantly, the black ape bared its fangs and gave a roar.

“Eek!” Tara shrieked, clinging to Rimee Ruu.

“Aah!” Yumi did as well, clinging to me instead.

“Hmm. Did I startle him?” Dan Rutim casually questioned as he pulled his hand back. The black ape closed its mouth as soon as he did.

“This net was made to protect the creature himself. If any of our guests start messing around, he’ll yell like that to call for help from his master.”

“His master? Does this black ape have a parent as well?”

“No, I meant the beast tamer, Old Man Shantu. This guy won’t do anything violent without an order from his tamer. Even if our guests throw rocks at him, he’ll just curl up and take it.”

Looking at it from another perspective, did that mean he would commit any violent act the beast tamer ordered? That was frightening in its own way.

“Hmm. So you’ve been able to communicate with beasts that well? Sometimes I feel like I’ve been able to get my thoughts across to my toots, Mim Cha, at least a little bit, but I’m certain I could never manage something like that!”

“That’s because this is our craft. I’m in the middle of learning how to tame beasts myself so that we can keep putting on animal performances even after Old Man Shantu passes.”

I could easily picture her manipulating the vicious black ape however she pleased. But while I was thinking about that, Ai Fa heaved a sigh.

“How would Granny Jiba feel if she were to lay eyes on this black ape? I fear it would sadden her to be reminded of her comrades who were eaten by such beasts.” She then shot a chilly look in my direction. “By the way, Yumi, at the forest’s edge, men and women who are not family shouldn’t touch one another needlessly.”

“O-Oh, you remembered my name, Ai Fa. I’m glad,” Yumi replied, still clinging to my neck. “But do you think you could let this slide for just a little longer? If I let go, I’ll probably collapse straight to the ground.”

The look in Ai Fa’s eyes grew even colder, but for some reason she was glaring at me rather than Yumi.

At any rate, the beast tamer’s real performance was still to come.

5

After that, we headed farther down the path, leaving the black vamda ape behind us.

What greeted us next were the two big lizards that had been pulling the wagon.

“Those are wors rock lizards. They’re a type of large reptile that lives in the sea of sand that’s to the south and the east from here.”

They were around three meters long, and looked basically like dinosaurs. They were also hiding high up in the trees, looking quite surprised at the arrival of us sightseers.

“They look just like giant madarama snakes. Do they eat people?”

“No. There are hardly any animals that live out in the sea of sands, so these guys have to subsist on nothing but shriveled leaves, and they’re even easier to tame than tolos.”

“Hmm. Now that you mention it, they do have the same sort of blank looks on their faces as tolos,” Ludo Ruu noted as he stared at the rock lizards up in the trees, showing no concern whatsoever.

“Many people in Sym and Jagar use them instead of tolos. They don’t run quite as fast as a tolos can, but they’re perfect for a nice leisurely trip.”

We continued farther down the path until our way was blocked by a hanging curtain.

“Now then, welcome to the beast tamer’s stage.”

Just like back at the entrance, Pino pulled the curtain open for us.

Rimee Ruu immediately exclaimed, "Wow!"

"Welcome. Please, come see what kind of show this old man can put on."

This part of the tent was over toward the road, in the space that would normally be used for stalls. The room was a slightly misshapen square, around five meters on a side, with a simple flat dirt floor. Standing there awaiting us were an old man and two animals.

The old man was the one we had previously seen holding the reins of the rock lizards. His hair had gone shockingly white, and he had grown it out to be pretty long, as well as his beard. Over his skinny frame, he wore a long raggedy robe speckled with black and gray. He stood before us with an easygoing aura about him like some sort of hermit, and he had a gentle expression on his face.

To his left he had some kind of leopard, and on his right there was a lion. The leopard had a light-brown speckled pelt and was quite beautiful. At a guess, I'd say it was about as long as I was tall, and though it was a large animal, it looked incredibly graceful. But unlike the leopards I was familiar with, it had fangs like a sabertooth tiger sticking out of its mouth.

The lion, meanwhile, was a size bigger than the leopard. Its whole body rippled with rugged muscles, and rather than beautiful, it looked incredibly powerful. On top of that, its overgrown mane was seriously striking. It looked exactly like the lions I was familiar with, except the fur coating its body was a pale gray, and its eyes were a perfectly clear light blue.

"This silver algura lion is named Huey. And this one is Sara, a gaaje leopard," the animal tamer said with a big grin. Though he seemed quite old, he also appeared to be rather hale and hearty. Still, he looked incredibly small, standing there between those two huge beasts. "Young guest, would you mind calling their names?" he asked, pointing at Rimee Ruu.

Rimee Ruu was taken aback, but after taking a moment to collect herself, she addressed the lion. "Huey?"

The silver lion made a sound like it was clearing its throat.

The young girl's eyes sparkled and she called out to the other animal. "Sara!"

The fanged leopard gave a throat-clearing roar as well.

“That’s amazing! They can understand what we say?!”

“They can make out their own names and the names of the members of their pride,” the old man replied with a smile, pulling his hands out from inside his robe. He was holding a pair of balls that looked to be about fifteen centimeters in diameter. They seemed to be made of rope wrapped around some sort of tough fruit shell.

“Now try calling their names while throwing these,” he said as he tossed the balls Rimee Ruu’s way, only for Ludo Ruu to swiftly snatch them out of the air. After checking them over to make sure there wasn’t anything suspicious about them, he handed the balls to his little sister and Tara, one each.

Her eyes filled with anticipation, Rimee Ruu shouted, “Huey!” and threw the ball high into the air. The lion stretched out its hind legs and caught the ball in its mouth.

Moving to follow suit, Tara yelled, “Sara!” and threw her ball. However, her hand slipped and the ball went flying well off course. Even so, the leopard nimbly leaped and caught the ball from the side before it touched the ground.

“That’s amazing!” the two girls shouted, giving a round of applause.

At the same time, the old man clapped his hands once.

Huey and Sara bowed their heads, then tossed the balls in their mouths high into the air. They flew so far that it almost looked like they would reach the ceiling three or four meters up before they finally fell, only for Huey and Sara to bat them with their right front paws.

The balls once again flew into the air, and this time when they fell, the beasts batted them back up with their front left paws. The animals were alternating back and forth between their forelimbs, essentially juggling the balls.

It was an amazing act. Both Yumi and Myme were now smiling and clapping too.

Finally, the old man gave one more clap of his hands and opened his arms wide, cuing the two animals to headbutt their balls, which then flew through

the air in an arc, returning to the palms of the old man's hands.

Then, he pursed his lips and gave a short whistle.

Instantly, Huey kicked off the ground and leaped over the tamer's head without any run-up. The second the lion landed, the old man whistled again, and now Sara leaped over him.

He continued to signal them by whistling with a nice quick tempo. The two beasts took turns leaping over him alongside the rhythm, forward and back, left and right. They would leap, land on the ground, face their tamer, and then leap again. What an incredibly invigorating display it was. Those claws seemed sharp enough to bring you to a tragic end if they so much as grazed you, but the old man just kept on smiling gently as the animals moved about him with almost mechanical precision.

"That's amazing. It's like there are people inside of them."

"No, no human could leap through the air that easily."

Even the hunters were now expressing their admiration.

Finally, the old man let out a single loud whistle.

Huey and Sara both jumped into the air simultaneously, crossing past one another over the old man's head, then landing and lying down like nothing had happened.

"Now then, would anyone here like to try riding on Sara's back?"

After a moment of silence, Rimee Ruu energetically waved her hands and said, "I do!"

"Hey, are you sure this is safe?" Ludo Ruu questioned, scrunching up his face and looking down at her.

"She will be in no danger whatsoever. If our dear guest here gets so much as a single scratch, I'll offer you my wrinkled neck to do with as you will."

"Giving us a single old man's neck wouldn't be much of a trade," Ludo Ruu grumbled, looking displeased.

However, Rimee Ruu simply said, "It's fine!" as she walked over in front of

Sara.

The old man stroked the leopard's head gently, and the beast lowered its huge body. Showing no fear whatsoever, Rimee Ruu climbed onto the creature's back with a "Hup!"

Toor Deen probably would have gone pale with fear again if she had been there, but Tara and Myme were both watching with excitement in their eyes. The most flustered person present might have actually been Yumi.

With everyone following the action intently, the old man gave another whistle and the big cat slowly rose as Rimee Ruu excitedly exclaimed, "Yay!"

Sara started gradually strolling around the room. The beast had such an elegant, graceful stride. I couldn't help but recall the impression I once had of Ai Fa being "like a leopard."

"Would you be okay with trying a bit of running?"

"Yeah!" Rimee Ruu replied, wrapping her arms around the leopard's neck.

With a snap of the old man's fingers, Sara's elegant stride picked up pace. Since it was a small room, there was a limit to how fast they could get, but it was quick enough that I could feel a breeze as they passed by.

Rimee Ruu's reddish-brown hair was fluttering about as she squealed in joy. Then the old man gave a sharp whistle, prompting the big cat to turn his way and kick off the ground. With Rimee Ruu still on the leopard's back, the beast leaped over the man's head once more.

"Uwaah!" Rimee Ruu clung tightly to Sara's neck.

They flew through the air, going even higher than the big cats had when they were leaping about earlier, and yet when the leopard landed on the ground, the touchdown was still completely silent. It was an incredibly gentle landing. However, it was still enough to make Rimee Ruu's arm strength suddenly give out, and she started to slide off of Sara's back. Quicker than Ludo Ruu could move to intervene, though, Huey bit down on the nape of the girl's neck.

"Eek!" Yumi shrieked.

However, Huey had only bitten the fabric of Rimee Ruu's outfit. All that

happened was the youngest Ruu daughter dangled in the air for a moment before being lowered to the ground.

“That really surprised me! Thanks, Huey!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed, burying her cheek in the lion’s mane with a smile. Huey just looked toward us, licking his own nose with a composed expression.

“Hmm. That certainly was impressive! These two are as clever as varb wolves!” Dan Rutim said with a hearty clap, sounding deeply moved.

With the gentle smile still on his face, the old man turned toward the former clan head. “Dear guest, you are a person of the forest’s edge, correct? Do you have any connection to the varb wolves that live on Mount Morga?”

“Indeed! I’ve met a varb wolf twice now, and I owe that beast my life!”

“How terribly interesting. I would love to form a bond with one myself,” the tamer replied, whistling once more. However, because Rimee Ruu was hugging both Huey and Sara at the moment, neither of them moved. Instead, the curtain off to our left suddenly moved.

The new animal that appeared caused the women of our group to coo in delight. It was a lion cub. Actually, it could have been the child of both Huey and Sara. It had a gray coat that was even paler than Huey’s, but it was also speckled like Sara’s.

At any rate, it looked to have only been born recently. It was around forty centimeters long, with a little body that made me think of a stuffed animal. That young animal was holding a large woven basket in its mouth as it toddled on over our way.

“That concludes the beast tamer’s performance. If you enjoyed yourselves, then please grant us some kindness.”

Thinking to myself that this was a pretty clever setup, I offered three red coins to cover the hunters as well. The women happily added half coins of their own, and then surrounded the young animal.

“Such a tiny baby! What’s this little one’s name?”

“That one is named Druey.”

“Um, is it all right to hug the little guy?” Myme asked, seeming unable to hold herself back.

“Please, go right ahead,” the old man replied with a smile.

After Pino had reached in and grabbed the basket from the side, Myme went ahead and scooped up the adorable little creature. It was no surprise that the women would all be so enchanted by such a fluffy little thing.



The little guy really did seem to be Huey and Sara's cub. The fur around the peak of its head formed a tuft that seemed like a precursor of the mane to come, and I could see fangs peeking out of the edges of its mouth. They would probably develop into formidable fangs like a saber-tooth tiger's as it grew, turning it into quite an impressive beast.

I guess we had leopons and ligers back in my old world. And I'm pretty sure ligers grew to be even bigger than the lions and tigers that were their parents.

At any rate, the little one was only around forty or so centimeters long right now. But its torso and limbs were thick, short, and stout compared to those of your average cat, which not only made it even more adorable, but also seemed like evidence that the little fellow would one day grow up to be unbelievably huge.

"It's a good thing Jeeda isn't here today," Ludo Ruu muttered to no one in particular. It certainly would have been more than a little awkward having him appear before Sara with his cloak made from a gaaje leopard pelt.

But wild gaaje leopards are violent man-eaters. Those are the ones Jeeda and Bartha were hunting in Masara.

I was reminded that hunting gaaje had to be a job that was just as intense as hunting giba. If I ran into such a massive carnivore out in the mountains, the only thing I could do would be to compose my last will.

"We aren't getting many guests today. Things were pretty lively up through yesterday, but they seem to have settled down for the moment," Pino said, having returned to her usual tone.

The women of our group were busy doting on Druey. Of particular note, while Ama Min Rutim had remained silent up till now, she had broken out in a smile that was unusually wide for her as she hugged the cub. It was pretty amusing for me.

At any rate, it seemed like the people of the forest's edge were enjoying the show put on by the Gamley Troupe as well. Thinking to myself that Lala Ruu would absolutely want to see this too, I turned toward Pino.

"You have thirteen members and quite a few animals to feed on top of that. It

must be quite a lot to handle.”

“Especially considering both our people and the animals are such big eaters. Still, it’s generally just the humans who throw a noisy fit when they’re hungry,” Pino replied with a grin as she held the basket under her arm.

By this point, I had already seen a good number of the thirteen members of the troupe.

There was the acrobat Pino, the minstrel Neeya, the twins Arun and Amin, the little masked man Zan, the strongman Doga, the flute player Nachara, the fortune teller Rai, the beast tamer Shantu, the thin man Dilo, who had stood at the entrance, and the strange person in the suit of leather armor whose name I didn’t know, but whom I had seen when they were pulling the wagons into town on the first day. That was eleven.

“So, is Gamley the troupe leader’s name?”

“Yeah, that’s right. The troupe leader hates sunlight more than anything, so he won’t show himself before nightfall. And we’ve got one other blockhead in the troupe who only moves around at night, so the two of them are both probably snoring away right now.”

Adding in those two nocturnal members, that came out to exactly thirteen. I would be looking forward to meeting them three days from now.

“Ah, I haven’t seen that person wearing the leather armor. Do they prefer the night too?”

“Hmm? Ah, Rolo’s pretty useless in the morning and generally just holes up in the tent. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to get everyone’s names sorted out. So that armored fellow’s name is Rolo?”

“Sir, are you saying you remembered all of our names?”

“Yeah. Aside from the one you said isn’t awake right now, I’d say I have everyone down.”

Pino’s eyes narrowed as if she were staring at something dazzling. “That’s wonderful to hear. Well, the blockhead who only moves around at night is

named Zetta, and the fortuneteller's full name is Railanos."

"Zetta and Railanos? Thanks, got it."

"Hey. You know, I still haven't even heard your name yet."

"Oh, Kamyua didn't mention it? I'm Asuta of the Fa clan. Sorry for being so late in introducing myself."

"Asuta of the Fa clan... That's a wonderful name," Pino said, grabbing ahold of her fluttering sleeves and giving an adorable bow. "You seem to have already memorized my name, but I'm Pino the acrobat. I look forward to working alongside you all until the end of the festival, Asuta of the Fa clan."

"Right back at you."

Pino still remained a deeply mysterious girl I didn't really know anything about. However, I couldn't help but get the feeling that she wasn't a bad person. Even if I had a terrible eye for that kind of thing, I still hoped that my impression was correct.

"By the way, just what sort of relationship do you have with Kamyua? We've gotten pretty deeply entangled with him ourselves."

"Well, he wanders all over the continent, so we just sort of run into him now and then. But he's definitely an interesting guy. He seems to be rather skilled too."

"That's certainly true," I replied with a smile. Unsurprisingly, even an eccentric group like this one still regarded Kamyua Yoshu as being an intriguing fellow.

"Well, we really stand out while we're traveling, so it's not rare at all for us to get attacked by bandits. Huey and Sara really come in handy at times like those."

"Yeah, I could imagine bandits just up and fleeing at the sight of them."

They had that big fellow, Doga, and the little guy, Zan, on top of that. With formidable people like them and a collection of intimidating beasts on hand, it was hard to imagine a bandit group that would try their luck with these guys.

If they travel without bodyguards, it's only natural that they'd be well

prepared.

Upon hearing that, I thought I could kind of understand the strangely fierce aura I had noticed from Zan, who specialized in throwing knives.

I felt like I had learned enough about them for now. “Well then, I guess it’s about time for us to leave. Thank you so much for taking the time to guide us today.”

“And thank you too. If the mood strikes you, feel free to come back any time. Huey and Sara can show you all sorts of other tricks too, after all.”

“Yeah, we’ll definitely be back!” Rimee Ruu energetically replied. After having given the young cub some love for a while, she was now snuggled up against Huey’s huge frame.

“We’re looking forward to visiting your stall again too. We’ll be counting on you for some delicious food tomorrow,” Pino said with a bewitching smile.

And with that, the day’s performance was brought to a close without incident. We would next visit the tent at night, three days from now, after we wrapped up our business on the day of dawn, when the sun god’s revival festival would finally kick off properly.

Chapter 3: The Night Before the Festival

1

The sun god's revival festival would begin on the day of dawn. The day before that, the twenty-first of the violet month, proved to be just as busy as always.

The only change was that tomorrow we would be serving our whole roast giba in the morning and open for business at night. The preparations for the stalls would be postponed to the early afternoon, so it might have seemed like we could take it easy...but no, such shortsighted thinking would have caused us big problems. The cooking that we usually did for the inns in the morning would have to be done in the afternoon before evening arrived too, which required careful planning.

Well, thinking about it at its simplest, all we had done was add the serving of the whole roast giba to our routine tasks, so there was no way our workload would be getting lighter rather than heavier. It nearly moved me to tears that not only had the chefs I had hired for coins volunteered to help out, but the members of the Ruu clan had too. Of course, that wasn't just on account of it making the work easier. It also made me happy that Donda Ruu and everyone else accepted my words about how offering the whole roast giba for free and running the stalls at night would help to strengthen our bonds with the people of Genos.

Up until now, the people of the forest's edge had taken care to keep away from the post town during the revival festival in order to avoid any unnecessary strife. Since their only god was the forest itself, they didn't care at all about the sun god's revival festival. And since the people of Genos avoided them to begin with, there was even less reason for them to go anywhere near a festival in town. That had been the stance held by the people of the forest's edge prior to this year.

It would soon be seven months since Ai Fa had taken me in. In that time, the

thinking of the people of the forest's edge, or at least those with ties to the Ruu, had changed dramatically. Hopefully the revival festival would serve as an opportunity to push their relationship with the people of Genos even further in that direction. With that in mind, I certainly wouldn't complain no matter how busy I got.

"Well then, we'll be back at the lower fifth hour, so I'll see you then."

After finishing up business in the post town, the Fa group separated from Reina Ruu's to go our own way, and today wasn't the only day we would be doing so. For the duration of the revival festival, I would be putting a hold on the usual study sessions in order to focus purely on prep work for business.

We five chefs and Ai Fa got into our two wagons and headed for the Fa house. It was the Gaaz woman who was holding the reins for Fafa. During this period, the temporary staff from the Gaaz, Ratsu, and Dagora would be essential for handling the prep work.

After receiving the report from their subordinate Dagora clan, the Beim had also pledged to lend their assistance, but they wanted to build up a stockpile of pico leaves and firewood first before sending over any of their women, so another newcomer would be joining us on the day following the day of dawn.

"Asuta, you guys are planning to head to the Daleim lands tonight, aren't you?" Yun Sudra called out from inside the wagon. "I would have loved to join you if it were possible. I'll definitely try to convince my clan head before next time!"

"Right. We'd love to have you along if it won't be a burden on your household."

The members of our group who would be helping with the whole roast giba tomorrow morning were planning to stay the night at Dora's house for two reasons. The Daleim lands were closer to the post town than the settlement at the forest's edge, and Rimee Ruu and I definitely wanted to get closer to Dora and Tara too.

However, it would be an imposition to have too many people visit all at once, and the members of the small clans had work they needed to handle too, so the

chefs heading to the Daleim lands were myself, Rimee Ruu, Lala Ruu, and Toor Deen. The hunters guarding us would be Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, and Dan Rutim.

That still made for a pretty large group, but Dora readily agreed to our request even so. Apparently, they temporarily hired a large number of people during busy periods, and they had plenty of bedding to spare.

Then, first thing tomorrow morning, the four of us would get to work, and a little later, Reina Ruu's group would come to lend their assistance. The fact that the revival festival and the Ruu clan's break period overlapped was a big help.

"Ah, it looks like everyone's gathered."

The Fa house had come into view, and next to it I spotted a group of six women waiting for us, from the Fou, Ran, and Liddo clans.

"Sorry for the wait. How are your preparations going?"

"Well, the poitan are all baked, and the herbs have been ground," the wife of the oldest son of the Fou house responded as the representative for the group.

Out of all the different things increasing our workload for the revival festival, the production of the curry base stood out especially. We had only needed to prepare enough for about a hundred people for the inns up till now, but over the last several days, that number had rapidly increased. That was why I had needed to leave grinding the massive amount of herbs to these women who didn't accompany us to the stalls.

When it came to actually cooking, they didn't tend to get very far without my supervision. But anyone could handle tasks like grinding herbs or baking poitan once they learned how to do it. Without such assistance from the Fou, Ran, and Liddo, we never would have been able to expand our business so much.

It was worth noting that Cyclaeus had especially valued herbs from Sym, so there had been a particularly large amount of them in the pantry of the Turan manor. But according to a report from Polarth that I had heard through Yang, it wouldn't be too long until they were exhausted at this rate.

"Reportedly, the issue of needing to increase our imports has been raised to several merchants from Sym, and similar conversations have been had in

regards to tau oil and sugar,” Yang had said.

Cyclaeus had monopolized those ingredients to use in his own meals, but now that he had fallen, so much supply had flooded the castle town that they couldn’t possibly use it all. We had been asked to help introduce those unfamiliar ingredients to the post town so that they wouldn’t go to waste. At this point, however, it seemed we had successfully overcome that challenge when it came to herbs from Sym and seasonings from Jagar.

When it came to the herbs from Sym in particular, I had been using up the majority of the supply all on my own. I could recall how astounded and yet pleased Polarth had looked about that.

“Also, the Meem clan delivered some meat here not long ago,” a Ran woman said, pointing at a wooden box I had purchased in the post town.

“Ah, a young giba? That’s a big help!”

I had let a number of clans know a while back that if they caught a young giba of the right size for a whole roast giba, I would like to buy it off of them.

I would have to burn the fur off its whole body right away and then pickle it in pico leaves. Had I not gotten enough of these by the day of, I would have had to use the dressed carcass of a mature giba instead, so this was a real relief.

“Um, which clan were the Meem again?”

“The Meem are a clan located right between the Suun and Liddo settlements. Just like the Auro, they fall under the Ratsu clan.”

There were only seventeen small clans without blood ties to one of the leading clans at the forest’s edge. Among them, eleven approved of the business run by the Fa clan, and we were now actually getting help from the majority of them.

Aside from the Deen and Liddo who fell under the Zaza, we were getting aid from the Fou, Ran, Sudra, Gaaz, Ratsu, Meem, and Auro. I was fairly sure the Gaaz had a related clan called the Matua as well, so that made for eight clans in total. Raielfam Sudra and Baadu Fou helped teach them how to let blood and dissect giba during their break periods, and so we were now able to purchase meat from all of them. Raielfam Sudra had also told me that once his next break

period arrived, he intended to visit the last three clans who had been left out last time because they were so far away.

There were only five small clans who opposed our business in the post town—the ones that were leftover when you subtracted our eleven supporters and the Fa clan itself from the total seventeen. Out of those, the Beim and Dagora had already begun learning bloodletting, dissection, and how to make delicious food.

Considering the fact that all the leading clans and those under them were already learning those techniques, that meant only six clans—three that approved of us and three that disapproved—still lived the same way they used to.

Thinking about it that way, I had caused quite a revolution here at the forest's edge. But while I was happy to realize that, it also made me feel seriously tense too.

“All right, let's get to work. Please split up into your separate groups.”

When it came to making the curry base, it wasn't as if we were only making enough for the following day each time. Currently, we had enough prepared for the next five days, and each day we made sure to maintain that much of a stockpile in the pantry.

We chefs split into two groups and got to work on our separate tasks. One group mixed the ground herbs together in the required proportions and gave them a light roasting. The other group took the herbs that had been roasted the day before and made them into the curry base.

One woman each from the Ran and Liddo were at the point where I could leave everything up to the roasting process to them, so the two of them had taken on the role of guiding the Gaaz and Ratsu women. Meanwhile, I took charge of the group preparing the curry base. At present, the only one who had fully mastered the process was Toor Deen, but it seemed like Yun Sudra and the Fou woman would get there soon.

Naturally, I was paying everyone for this work. The minimum hourly wage I offered was two red coins, while the highest rate was five red coins for Toor Deen. The prospects were looking good for giba curry becoming a regular dish,

but that meant there would be a need for more people to handle the prep work for it in the future, which forced me to make a plan to get them trained.

If I could leave the curry base production entirely up to them, I would split the profits from it with them as their wages, and then I could spend my time on developing another dish. Just like with the smoked meat production, I was in the process of establishing a system for the division of labor.

“Once this is done, next up is the pasta, right? Is there any other work besides that to be taken care of?” Toor Deen asked while chopping up aria.

“Let’s see,” I said, giving the matter careful thought. “Our real fight will begin in the early afternoon tomorrow. We’ve got to get things ready so that our work will go as quickly as possible. Basically, that means sorting out our ingredients and cutting the meat. And we’ll also need to make the tau oil sauce used for the poitan wraps today.”

We were going to need to finish both the food for the inns and the prep work for the stalls at the same time, so it was incredibly important to come up with detailed procedures. There was no other option than for me to give it all a whole lot of thought. Reina and Sheera Ruu were undoubtedly doing much the same thing for the Ruu clan too.

It was then that Ai Fa let out a strange “Hrm.”

I could hear the sound of a wagon approaching from the north.

When I turned to look without thinking, what I saw made me gulp. It was a wagon with no canopy pulled by a totos with somewhat blackish feathers. Holding the reins was a brawny man wearing a giba skull on his head.

“The head of the Dom clan? It’s been some time,” Ai Fa said.

Deek Dom was even bulkier than Donda Ruu. He silently got down from the driver’s seat. Lem Dom and Sufira Zaza had been riding in the wagon behind him.

“I hear that you suffered serious injuries in the battle with the lord of the forest, head of the Fa clan... How have you been doing since then?”

“Normal movements no longer hurt at all. In another ten days, I will be able to

start training to reforge my dulled body back into shape.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m pleased to know that a hunter as excellent as you did not fully lose her strength,” Deek Dom stated, his black eyes blazing from within the shadowy interior of his giba skull. He had such presence and intensity about him that I had trouble believing he was actually the same age as me and Ai Fa. “Up until a few days ago, my foolish clan member has been imposing on you greatly...which is why I’m truly sorry to be making a further request of you today.”

“Clan head of the Dom, what request do you wish to make of me?” Ai Fa asked back, perfectly calm.

Deek Dom held his tongue for a bit, but then he replied, “My fool of a younger sister seems unable to cast aside her desire to live as a hunter. If that is how she insists on being, there is a hurdle I would have her overcome... To face the Fa clan head in a contest of strength once her wounds have healed, and to win. That was the condition I set for her.”

I almost dropped the aria I was holding without thinking.

Ai Fa remained silent, with her expression perfectly composed. Staring straight at her, Deek Dom continued. “Though you are a woman, you possess unparalleled strength as a hunter. I do feel that a woman of similar capability would be qualified to live as a hunter. But put another way, I believe that one must be a hunter on your level in order to be permitted to cast aside her work as a woman...”

Ai Fa still offered no reply.

“If Lem proves she possesses the strength needed to defeat you, I shall rein in my feelings on the matter and allow her to become a hunter.”

“You would entrust the fate of your precious family member to me?” Ai Fa asked back, terribly quiet. “I’ve spent a fairly long time with Lem Dom. If I became attached to her during that time, I could feel a desire to see her wishes fulfilled. In which case, I might yield the victory to her, and you would then allow her to become a hunter without having the proper strength for it, leaving her fated to die out in the forest...”

“I believe that you are not so shallow of a person as to do such a thing. And if Lem’s fate is thrown off its proper path as a result, then that would be my fault entirely,” Deek Dom calmly replied despite the fire burning in his black eyes. “I’ll swear here and now that I would not hold an unjust grudge against you in such a case. I would simply live my life as a hunter until it runs out, cursing my own foolishness all the while.”

“I wonder what I could have done to have earned such trust from you.”

“That’s for me to decide, not you, head of the Fa clan.”

After that, Deek Dom held his tongue and Lem Dom silently stepped forward beside him.

“I wish to make this request of you too, Ai Fa. It seems this is the only path open to me to become a hunter while remaining a member of the Dom clan.” Lem Dom’s expression also looked unusually calm, though she was wearing a smile that seemed to be directed far off toward the future. “I really do want to live alongside Deek. I want to become a hunter as a member of the Dom clan. As Lem Dom. And I swear that if I lose to you, I will never say anything about casting aside the Dom name or becoming a hunter again.”



That was the conclusion Lem and Deek Dom had reached over the course of the last several days.

Ai Fa closed her eyes for a moment, and then in her usual tone stated, “I would never sully a sacred contest of strength between hunters. As long as you understand that much, then I shall accept your request.”

“Thanks, Ai Fa,” Lem Dom replied, her eyes narrowing blissfully.

“You have my gratitude for this kindness, clan head of the Fa,” Deek Dom said, bowing his head. “In that case, I shall allow Lem to continue living near the Fa house as she has been doing. After all, that is what she wishes for. And Asuta of the Fa clan, if it is not an inconvenience to do so, I hope that you will continue to give her work...”

“Right, got it,” I answered while noticing that Sufira Zaza was glaring at Ai Fa with teary eyes. She must have been praying for Deek Dom to refuse to allow any argument and refuse Lem Dom’s request. When that didn’t happen, I was sure she had been hoping that Ai Fa would turn them down.

It wasn’t as if I couldn’t understand how she felt, but it was up to the people involved to decide these things. I had no intention of interjecting when they were all so resolved to see this through.

“Very well. I ask that you continue to watch over my foolish younger sister for now. I need to see Sufira Zaza back to the Ruu settlement, so please excuse me.”

“Sufira Zaza is still staying at the Ruu settlement?”

“Yes. It seems Gulaf Zaza said he wished for her to observe the Ruu’s and Fa’s actions in the post town for a bit longer.”

With that, Deek Dom and Sufira Zaza departed, leaving just Lem Dom behind.

“Well then, once again, I’ll be counting on you two. Could I help out with anything in order to earn my dinner for the night?” Lem Dom asked, showing her usual stubbornness as she flashed the whites of her teeth in a big grin.

Several hours later, we finished up all our work and then reunited with the members of the Ruu clan before heading to the Daleim lands.

I gave Lem Dom some coins for the work she had done so that she could purchase dinner from another clan.

Ai Fa had a pensive look on her face the entire time during the trip, but Rimee and Lala Ruu were both in high spirits. They must have really been looking forward to staying over at Dora's place, and honestly, I felt the same way.

I couldn't help but be concerned about Ai Fa's feelings about having to shoulder Lem Dom's fate, but when she accepted, she must have had just as much resolve in her heart as the two who had been asking. So as a member of the Fa, I intended to support my clan head with all I had.

The wagon kept rolling onward through the twilight, knowing nothing of my thoughts.

In another half an hour, the sun would fully set. The Daleim fields were dyed a purplish-red and looked indescribably idyllic, not to mention beautiful.

"I see. You certainly can't see anything like this at the forest's edge," Ludo Ruu remarked, as this was his first time coming here.

Shin Ruu was riding atop Mim Cha's back along with Dan Rutim, and he must have felt much the same way. Neither they nor Lala Ruu had accompanied us to the Daleim lands before, so they had never laid eyes on this wide-open cleared space either.

Surrounded by the members of the Ruu clan, Toor Deen looked completely entranced by the twilit scene reflected in her eyes. It was because of my personal intervention that she was able to participate even though she wasn't on a break period. It might have been a bit presumptuous to say so, but I couldn't help thinking about her as something like an apprentice.

Reina and Sheera Ruu were somewhat further removed from me and were walking their own paths. They were spending every day at the Ruu settlement diligently practicing together. But Toor Deen's will was just as strong as theirs despite being only ten years old, so I was always thinking about how I wanted to give her the best possible environment to grow up in.

“I’m still inexperienced myself, so it would be a little arrogant for me to say something like that. And besides, you’ve pulled ahead of me when it comes to sweets.” That was something I had said about my feelings while asking Toor Deen to accompany us, which had ended up making her cry.



“I don’t know how I could possibly repay this debt of having you go so far to look after me...”

“You don’t have to repay anything. Just keep on doing your best to create delicious food.”

Even so, Toor Deen had sobbed for five minutes straight. Even though Ai Fa had scolded me, saying “What in the world are you doing!” I still considered it a good memory.

As I gave myself over to such thoughts, our destination finally came into view.

“Hello there. We’ve been waiting for all of you from the forest’s edge.”

This was our second visit to Dora’s home in the Daleim lands. This time we passed straight through the fields to the house, where Dora greeted us with a smile.

“We’ve been real busy with work too. I’m sorry it took so long to invite you over again.”

“Please don’t apologize. *I’m* sorry for imposing on you at such a busy time.”

As we exchanged our greetings, Dora guided us into his house.

It was a wooden home that was built a bit differently from the inns in the post town. The roof was straw-thatched, and it was generally more like a log cabin rather than a building made using planks, but it was still a fine two-story structure. The large one-story building next door was a storehouse for vegetables and also provided lodgings for the temporary hires.

When we stepped into the main hall, we found six members of Dora’s family waiting for us. That included his two sons, Tara, his mother, the younger brother of his late father, and his older son’s toddler. Dora’s wife and the wife of his son were busy working on dinner.

“Yay! Welcome, Rimee Ruu!” Tara exclaimed, taking a leap off her wooden chair toward the youngest Ruu daughter. Rimee Ruu hugged Tara tightly with a blissful smile on her face.

“You’re going to cook something for us too, right? We’re all starving, so we’re looking forward to it,” Dora said.

“Sure thing. Okay, we’ll see you all later.”

We had borrowed their kitchen the last time we had visited too. We started walking in that direction after bowing to Dora’s family, who were looking at us with a variety of expressions.

“My, welcome. Thank you for coming all this way from the forest’s edge, everyone,” an older woman who was a little on the slender side said, turning our way with a gentle smile. She was Dora’s wife. We had seen her last time as well. Next to her was a woman who looked just a bit older than me: the wife of Dora’s son.

“We’re done with our preparations, so please use the kitchen however you please. We’ll go ahead and move this pot.”

Apparently, Dora’s family had said all sorts of harsh things back when he had first started getting close to us. The residents of the Daleim lands probably couldn’t understand why in the world he would want to form bonds with the infamous people of the forest’s edge. But tonight their smiles were just so carefree that it was hard to believe that had once been the case. It was all thanks to Dora and Tara spending so much time persuading them, as well as the fact that the crimes of the Suun clan and house of Turan had been exposed. I naturally had some really warm feelings toward them these days.

“All right, then; we’ll go ahead and borrow your kitchen now.”

As it was the least we could do in return, we were going to make two dishes for dinner ourselves. I would be making a pasta-with-ketchup-style dish, while the Ruu clan were preparing giba meat grilled with herbs.

I cut up some aria, pula, and sausage and heated it all up with a ketchup-like sauce I had prepared at home. Then I just needed to mix in the boiled pasta and sauté everything until the moisture in it had cooked off. I had also finely grated some gyama dried milk to be sprinkled over the top once the dish was divvied up onto separate plates.

As for the meat grilled with herbs, the others had done the prep work at the Ruu settlement and now they just needed to cook it. It had a curry-style flavor made by steeping the meat in three different herbs and was accompanied by aria and nanaar.

“Are you all done? Then let’s carry everything out together.”

With that, we took the plates out to the main hall where everyone was waiting, alongside the food prepared by the wives. Each dish was on its own large plate, which would be divided up and served on smaller plates.

“This is surely the first time we’ve ever had so many guests. I had to borrow the extra chairs and table from my younger brother’s house and pull everything out of storage too. I hope you’ll forgive us if anything’s a bit slanted,” Dora remarked with an even brighter smile than usual. Most of his family were giving us friendly looks. The only ones who seemed to be regarding us with stern expressions were the two older people.

There were two large tables placed together right in the middle of the main hall. The members of Dora’s family were seated on two of the four sides, so we took the remaining two. Rimee Ruu and Tara naturally grabbed two neighboring corner seats, while Ai Fa and Toor Deen sat on either side of me.

The hunters all hung their cloaks along the wall and placed their swords underneath. Then, after apologizing to Dora’s family for keeping their knives on their persons, they all took their seats. Shin Ruu wasn’t used to sitting in a chair and looked a bit uncomfortable, but he unsurprisingly didn’t voice a complaint.

“Well then, let’s dig in! Ah, but at the forest’s edge you have a pre-meal chant you say, don’t you? Please go ahead, and don’t mind us.”

We went ahead and did just that. Perhaps because it was their own house, Dora’s family didn’t say a single word, instead simply offering a brief moment of silent prayer before grabbing their plates.

“This smells just like that curry dish. And it certainly seems tasty.”

For the majority of Dora’s family, this was their second meal with us, so they showed no hesitation about taking some giba cooking. Meanwhile, this was my first time seeing a dinner in the Daleim lands, so I was really interested in the food they had made.

Since it was the night before a holiday, they seemed to have prepared a more extravagant meal than usual. Just at a glance, I saw a soup, a stew, grilled kimyuus meat, tino pickled in salt, baked poitan...all of them, made by Dora’s

family.

To start with, I went ahead and had a taste of the soup.

It was a dark brown color and had the aroma of myamuu about it. Judging by the color, it must have included tau oil too. I had already heard that since Dora's house now had a good deal more money to their name, they had started purchasing tau oil and sugar.

As for the solid ingredients, the soup used aria, nenon, kimyuus meat, and some sort of unfamiliar greens. I couldn't quite tell if I had seen them anywhere before or not, but I at least knew it wasn't something offered at Dora's stall. I bit into some of that first, and a very straightforward greeny flavor with a slight bitterness to it filled my mouth.

"Ah, that's a nenon leaf. They shrivel up in half a day after you remove them from the stem, so I can't sell them, but they're an important ingredient for us here."

"I see. That sounds like a nice perk."

When I took another bite of it together with some of the finely sliced kimyuus meat and aria, the texture and hint of bitterness provided a fantastic accent to the dish. The only seasonings used in the soup were salt and tau oil, but it made for a relaxing, simple flavor overall.

And then there was the nenon in the soup. I bit into some without thinking about it, and was caught off guard by the unexpected texture and flavor.

Nenon was a vegetable that was very similar to a carrot. But this one was much more solid and chewy, and had a condensed sweetness too.

The texture was kind of similar to boiled bamboo shoots. When I bit into it, a very un-nenon-like sweetness spread throughout my mouth. Normally, it played an excellent supporting role to draw out the flavors of other ingredients, but here it stood out more than anything else in the soup.

"Um, did you use some sort of special nenon?" I asked without thinking.

Dora's wife replied with a bashful smile, "No. Those were nenon that were damaged and couldn't be sold. They go bad quicker than most other vegetables,

so we dry them in the sun to better preserve them.”

“Ooh, so this is what happens to nenon when it’s dried out?”

That was a new discovery. If the texture remained like this even after putting them in water, they must have been quite thoroughly dehydrated. That would open up all sorts of options not just for soup, but stir-fries as well.

That’s a vegetable seller’s house for you. Now I’m looking forward to trying the rest even more.

Next up was the stew.

This one contained a small amount of karon leg meat and had chatchi and pula for the vegetables. But the broth was a deep purplish red, and it was giving off a fruity sweet-and-sour smell. It must have come from crushed and boiled arow.

Arow was a fruit that tasted like something between a strawberry and a blueberry. But it had a low sugar content, so when using it in sweets, you would have to add some sugar or honey. Neither were used in this dish, though, so the berries just added a sour flavor.

Still, it wasn’t all that cheap of an ingredient, so it wasn’t like they had used that much of it for the color it added to the dish. When coupled with the saltiness of the meat, it made for quite a unique taste.

Up until not that long ago, they had never used any seasonings beside salt in the Daleim lands. I figured the powerfully flavorful myamuu, arow, and tarapa had been important to them to add some pop to their dishes.

Nobody ever made sweets outside of the castle town either, so is that how fruits like arow and sheel ended up getting used in ordinary dishes like this? I thought to myself.

But then Lala Ruu suddenly shouted, “Ah! Rimee, you little runt! Why did you give me such a big pula?! You know I don’t like that stuff, don’t you?!”

“Huh? Mom said not to be picky about vegetables. Ludo’s eating it, so you should too, Lala.”

“I’ll eat it, but you should’ve made it a smaller one!”

“But I couldn’t find any smaller than that.”

Pula was a vegetable shaped like a thick ginkgo leaf with a taste similar to a bell pepper. It was true that even when cut in half, its size was pretty hefty for a stew.

I was feeling a bit flustered after that overly open exchange between sisters, but Dora’s wife just laughed it off. “My, you don’t like pula? That’s just like Tara.”

However, Tara was wolfing down her own large pula right at that very moment. “The pula in my mom’s cooking isn’t super bitter. You should give it a try, Lala Ruu.”

Lala Ruu looked a bit dejected, but after stealing a glance at Shin Ruu next to her, she worked up her resolve and bit into the thick vegetable.

“Huh...? It really isn’t very bitter at all...”

“Right? The more finely you cut up pula, the more bitter it becomes. I don’t dislike it myself, but young children tend to hate bitter vegetables,” Dora’s wife said.

From what I could recall, the bitterness of green peppers changed a lot based on if you cut them vertically or horizontally. If you cut against the grain of the fibers, it would cause that bitter flavor to grow stronger.

“You aren’t fond of pula, Lala Ruu? That’s strange, considering you aren’t a young child anymore,” Shin Ruu said while furrowing his brow a bit, perhaps earning himself a kick on the leg below the table. “Are you mad...? I wasn’t intending to make you angry.”

“Oh, just be quiet and eat!”

Dora’s son and his wife were chuckling in amusement by this point.

Feeling relieved that Lala Ruu’s frankness hadn’t led to any hard feelings, I turned toward the next big plate. It was the last main dish, the kimyuus meat one.

It was composed of rather thick cuts of kimyuus breast meat stacked up high on the plate. Though they hadn’t pulled any real tricks with the meat itself, it

was presented along with a vegetable dip and eaten wrapped in a parboiled tino leaf, which seemed to be the style in the Daleim lands.

Though I called it a dip, it didn't use any cream. It was made by stirring finely diced vegetables together with a mixture of tau oil, sugar, and sheel juice, creating a thick red and green sauce. The vegetables in question seemed to be tarapa, aria, and nenon. None of them had been cooked, so the sourness from the tarapa and the sharp taste of the aria were quite stimulating.

Had they just used sheel juice before they started purchasing tau oil and sugar? That seemed like it would have been quite lacking in flavor, but what I had just eaten was rather simple and yet also quite flavorful. The kimyuus meat didn't assert itself all that much, so the delicious flavor of the vegetables came through a lot more clearly.

The tino pickled in salt provided as a side dish also had quite a strong flavor to it. They had included the tough core, but it was just a bit on the soft side with a really nice crispness left in the center. It was rather sour, though, so they must have let it ferment for quite some time. At any rate, it made for a perfect palate cleanser of a side dish.

The baked poitan had boiled aria kneaded into it—julienned rather than finely chopped, so I felt like they stood out a bit too much, but thanks to being well heated through in advance, their sharp taste was completely gone. Following the example set by Dora's family, I went ahead and tried dipping it into the soup and stew, and it turned out that the aria's strong presence was a plus in the end.

"These dishes are all delicious. And it's great that the vegetables are so fresh."

"You don't have to worry about being so polite. I can't imagine you're all that impressed with anything we were able to make," Dora said.

"That's not true at all. It's really helpful, getting to experience all the little tricks you came up with that I hadn't thought of."

"Still, tau oil and sugar sure are tricky to use. It can end up a real mess if you're careless. I'm always so anxious when using them," our host's wife chimed in with a shy smile.

When she heard that, Lala Ruu tilted her head and commented, “Hmm? Then why don’t you just not mix it into the dish and then pour it over the top later? I used to burn things all the time when I tried grilling meat with tau oil, so I flavored my food like that for a while.”

“Ah, that might just do the trick. Tau oil has a strong flavor when used as is, but it should be easy to handle if you water it down and then add it later. And if you mix sugar with minced myamuu, that should create a whole different sort of delicious flavor,” I added.

“I see,” Dora remarked with a broad smile. “If that’s what you all think, I’m sure you’re right! After all, you’ve been able to create so many delicious dishes using our vegetables.”

Apparently, Dora quite enjoyed my pasta with ketchup. His sons had been taught how to eat it as well, and when they awkwardly twisted the pasta around their three-pronged forks and took a bite, their eyes opened wide in surprise.

“This was made using tarapa bought from our place? I almost can’t believe it,” one of them said.

“You make it by mixing together tarapa, aria, myamuu, and chitt seeds and letting them simmer. For seasonings, I added salt, sugar, pico leaves, and mamaria vinegar.”

“Ah, so it’s this delicious because you put that much into it? It’s definitely not something we could imitate, though.”

“Ah, no, as long as you don’t get the amounts wrong, anyone could make it. And it doesn’t use any ingredients more expensive than sugar.” As I was speaking, a flash of inspiration struck me. “If you’d like, I could teach you the proper amounts and the process. Just pouring it over grilled meat or veggies is enough to make something really tasty, and you can also stir-fry with it like I did here. Oh, and it should go well with fried eggs too.”

“Huh? Oh, no, it wouldn’t be right to take so much of your time. The people from the inns pay money for your cooking, don’t they?” Dora replied.

However, I shook my head and answered, “Not for this. Ketchup isn’t a meal.

I'd just be showing you how to make a condiment. It would feel pretty overbearing to me if I went into someone else's home and told them how to cook their own food, but I would be very glad if you could use that condiment to make some delicious dishes."

"Yeah, but..."

"Also, Yumi's been making a dish called okonomiyaki at her stall, and I taught her how to make a couple condiments called Worcestershire sauce and mayonnaise to go along with it. They're both really easy to make and they taste great if you just add them to your finished dishes, so they're not difficult to work with at all."

Dora stared at me, the ends of his eyebrows drooping. "It really wouldn't be any trouble for you, Asuta?"

"Of course not. You always give us priority when it comes to the vegetables you sell, so let me at least do a little something to return the favor."

And so, I promised that when I came to visit again four days from now, I would teach them how to make ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and mayonnaise. Of course, that still felt like it was far from enough to repay their warm hospitality.

After thanking me for a while, Dora turned toward the seat next to him.

"So, when are you finally going to try the giba meat, mom? Didn't you already prepare yourself to give it a try?"

"Hmph, I don't remember doing any such thing," the older woman who had just been quietly slurping soup responded harshly. She was Dora's mother and Tara's grandmother. "Even if all the criminals from the forest's edge have been captured, that doesn't change the fact that giba are terrifying beasts. I don't understand why I should be happy to swallow down the meat of those creatures."

"Why? Because giba meat is delicious, of course. What other reason could you need?" Dora shot back with a strained smile, then turned toward the other old person who had been sitting at the table, silent and sullen. "Uncle, you have pent up resentment toward giba, don't you? So why don't you try wiping some

of it away by eating their meat? Use them to fill your stomach, and maybe it'll make up for all the vegetables they ruined."

Finally, with great reluctance, the two of them reached for their spoons and skewers, but in the end they had nothing but complaints. "It's all slippery and hard to eat," and, "This is too spicy to eat."

"Ugh, you're hopeless... Sorry, Asuta, but next time could you prepare something that'll leave these old bags of bones speechless?"

"Is that any way to talk about your own mother?" his mom murmured with a really stern look on her face.

The older residents of the Daleim lands had especially deep-rooted issues with the people of the forest's edge and giba. But they had permitted us to sit at the same table as them, and they had at least technically tried to eat our food. I absolutely intended to do everything I could to reach a higher level of mutual understanding with them.

"In that case, you should make giba ribs next time! I can't imagine anyone disliking those!" Dan Rutim very suddenly interjected with a chuckle.

The elders turned and shot him a suspicious look as he continued.

"Giba are incredibly powerful beasts! And you can gain their indomitable strength by eating them! You guys should build up your strength too, so you can keep growing all these delicious vegetables! After all, no matter how delicious giba meat may be, you can't live a healthy life without a complete diet!"

"Right. We're able to look after fields in peace because all of you who live at the forest's edge risk your lives to hunt down giba. We'll keep working hard too so we can sit at the same table like this and not be too embarrassed about it." That reply hadn't come from Dora, but rather his older son.

From there, the son's wife started talking with Lala Ruu and Toor Deen, and the younger son struck up a conversation with Shin Ruu. The atmosphere around the dinner table was starting to become more and more energetic.

Then we pulled the cork out of the bottle of fruit wine we had brought as a gift, and things got even more lively. Tara, Rimee Ruu, and Ludo Ruu had been having a friendly chat already, but now even the naturally silent Ai Fa and

Dora's uncle and mother were getting dragged into the conversation. Just like on the night when Dora and the others had come to visit the forest's edge, the scene really tugged at my heartstrings.

The next time an opportunity like this came up, I really wanted to have Yun Sudra, Reina Ruu, and Yumi participate too. If the bonds that connected all of us could spread and grow deeper like that, the deep-rooted discord between the forest's edge and Genos could be reduced, at least a little. That was what I kept thinking about as I watched over everyone enjoying themselves around the dinner table.

3

After dinner had concluded, we were shown to our bedrooms. However, even with such a big house, it wasn't as if Dora had a huge number of rooms to spare. The men and women were given one room each, with Tara's bedding being brought into the women's room.

"All right, I'm sure nothing will happen like back in Dabagg, but I can still trust you to take care of Rimee and everyone, right, Ai Fa?" Ludo Ruu called out to my clan head.

After that, everyone started heading into their separate rooms. The last ones left outside were Ai Fa and I, as we had planned between the two of us in advance.

With the moonlight streamed in through a window, I leaned up against a wooden wall. Ai Fa positioned herself next to me, and then breathed a little sigh.

"What a busy day it's been."

"Yeah. And it's going to be even busier tomorrow."

We would be handling the whole roast giba tomorrow morning, then in the early afternoon we would take care of preparing meals for the inns and stalls. At night, we would run our business, and if we had any strength left after that, we would stop by the Gamley Troupe's tent. A fittingly hectic first day of the festival.

“So you’ll add the Beim woman to your work force at the stalls the day after tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“In that case, tomorrow will be the last day I help out around the stall,” Ai Fa stated, a terribly calm look on her face.

I was probably wearing the exact same sort of expression.

“It’s been really great having you help out with the stalls. When you’re on a break period or whatever in the future, I’d love to have you do it again, at least so long as it doesn’t get in the way of your training.”

“I see...” Ai Fa said, smiling at me. “It is not as if I train all day every day, so I would be able to help out to some extent. And I actually found it surprisingly enjoyable...”

“I see. Glad to hear it.”

“Indeed. Well, I suppose it’s only natural I would feel that way, when you were standing beside me...” Ai Fa remarked with a wonderfully gentle look on her face.

Even now when she couldn’t properly train, I still didn’t think she had any excess fat on her or anything. But somehow, she seemed to look a bit more like a normal girl than she used to...

I had always found her to have more than enough womanly charm, but now that she had been distanced from her high-stress lifestyle as a hunter and been forbidden from muscle training, perhaps there had been some sort of shift in her hormone balance or something.

So if Ai Fa quit being a hunter entirely, would she eventually start dripping with pheromones like Vina Ruu?

I found it hard to picture her like that.

Anyway, Ai Fa would remain herself no matter her circumstances, but it was the awe-inspiringly strong hunter I knew that had charmed me.

I adored both the Ai Fa whose wildcat eyes blazed brightly as she faced everything life threw at her and the one who gently smiled at me now. That’s

what I was thinking about as I stared back into her eyes.

“It will take ten more days to heal my wounds, and after that, another half a month for me to completely regain my strength as a hunter... I’ll face Lem Dom after that,” Ai Fa calmly stated, and then continued on, “It goes without saying, but I will be fighting her with everything I have.”

“Right. That’s the only thing you can do.”

“Indeed... Still, even if Lem Dom’s path to becoming a hunter is cut off, that would simply mean she will have to live as a woman of the forest’s edge. It’s hardly an unfortunate fate...” Ai Fa said, still wearing a gentle smile but now furrowing her brow and looking a bit pained. “It fills my heart with joy to be able to live as a hunter. But I’m sure I would be just as happy living a proper life as a woman as well...”

“Mmhmm.”

“I only started thinking that way after I met you,” Ai Fa said as she moved away from the wall. “No matter how things play out, Lem Dom will be able to live a happy life. That’s why I have no compunctions against taking that fool down.”

“That’s a pretty violent topic for a night like tonight, Ai Fa.”

With a dubious tilt of her head, my clan head turned around. “Well then, we should both go rest now. You need to recover from your exhaustion, Asuta.”

“Yeah. Goodnight, Ai Fa.”

And so, our busy day that only calmed down at the very end came to a mellow close. Tomorrow, the sun god’s revival festival would finally kick off. After Ai Fa and I exchanged one last glance, I opened the door to the bedroom where Ludo Ruu and the others were waiting.

Chapter 4: The Day of Dawn

1

Our morning in the Daleim lands began just as quickly as they did at the forest's edge.

Everyone was already out of bed by the time the sky had started to brighten, and by the time the first rays of sunlight were streaming in through the windows, things were already in full swing. It turned out the residents of the Daleim lands were every bit as hardworking as the people of the forest's edge.

"All right, we're heading out into the fields now. Good luck with your own work, Asuta," Dora called out after washing his face with water from a jug. "Even if it is a holiday, we can't just fool around like the folks from town. We've got to work hard until the sun hits its peak, and then we'll come check out your stalls."

"Right. I'll be waiting."

Naturally, we had no time for fooling around either. After getting dressed, we gave a courteous farewell to everyone from Dora's family and then departed the Daleim lands.

Once we had reached the highway, we were able to run our tolos at full speed. Dan Rutim and Rimee Ruu rode atop Mim Cha, while the rest of us were in Gilulu's wagon. A ten-minute ride down the stone-paved road later, we arrived in the post town, where we started by borrowing our stalls. It hadn't even been thirty minutes since sunrise yet, but Milano Mas still greeted us the same as always.

"Even if it is a holiday, I can't sleep late if our inn has customers. The only ones fooling around are the street vendors."

Still, as one might expect with it being so early on the morning of a holiday, it was terribly quiet in the post town. There were few enough people on the road

that you could easily count them on your hands. It was definitely a fresh, new way of seeing the town for those of us who had only seen the place when it was hectic and lively.

As we advanced down the street with our three stalls, an even more unfamiliar sight came into view: the stall area with no stalls set up in it. We had passed this way rather early in the day once before, back when we went on our trip to Dabagg, but that time there were already a few stalls set up along the way with a fair number of passersby. Now, it was completely empty.

The area of bare ground that had been cleared out for the stalls really was quite an expanse, and without any stalls, houses, or inns around, there was no reason for anyone else to pass through. Normally, there would be a fair number of folks who got up early because they were going out on some kind of trip, but there wouldn't be many travelers leaving Genos during the revival festival, so the scene before us was utterly deserted.

"Hey, if this is how things are going to be, will anyone even notice us roasting the giba?" Lala Ruu asked while pushing one of the stalls.

I shook my head. "It's fine. Around the upper fifth hour, the castle will be distributing kimyuus meat and fruit wine, and there will be people setting up stalls to grill it. It's a gift from the lord of Genos, as are the cooks' wages."

"Oh? That's quite generous of him. So each time there's one of those special holidays, they give out meat and wine like that?"

"That's right. It's a once-a-year festival, so the duke must want to show off Genos's strength and prosperity to both the residents and travelers. And if a gesture like that ends up drawing more people to Genos, it could actually make the town richer as a result."

"Oh yeah?" Lala Ruu replied with a shrug. "I thought it was a waste for us to give out giba meat for free, but we can't let the nobles beat us if that's what they're planning."

"Yeah. When the Ruu clan has a banquet at their settlement for their subordinate clans, they use their own coins to pay for all the food, right? Just think of it as something like that."

As we talked, our assigned space came into view at the northern end of the stall area. Naturally, the Gamley Troupe's tent was also deathly silent.

"All right, let's get started."

First up was getting the giba meat ready. We set down our three wooden boxes on the stalls' work surfaces, and pulled out the giba that had been pickled in pico leaves.

These were young giba with the fur burned off their pelts. Three of them, each around forty to fifty centimeters long, weighing roughly thirty kilos with their blood and organs removed. After scraping out the pico leaves we had packed inside their abdomens as well, we borrowed the assistance of the hunters to stick metal skewers from their throats down through their rears.

Next, we rubbed salt into them all over and packed their stomachs with vegetables in the way we had previously devised. The vegetables included aria, nenon, tino, chatchi, ma pula, and ma gigo. Once we had that done, we loosely sewed the stomachs together using fibaha vines, and then it was finally time to set them up on their stands.

Since it was forbidden to light fires on the ground, we were using the stalls instead. After removing the work surfaces with their holes that we normally used to hold pots in place, we suspended the giba above the flames. We stacked up some gray bricks we had purchased from the castle town by way of Yang on either side of the braziers, then placed the ends of the skewers on top of them, with the whole setup being around my chest height.

After that, we just had to drive some U-shaped iron stakes into the bricks so that the skewers wouldn't slide loose, and we were good to go. The last thing we did was bend the ends of the skewers to make them easier to turn and wrap them in cloth so we could hold them safely.

"All right, are the fires looking okay?"

"Yeah, they seem fine."

The insides of the braziers were glowing red with the charcoal we had purchased from Mikel. With all the setup finished, we got to cooking.

"Now we just need to keep turning it so the meat doesn't burn, right?"

“Yeah, and add more charcoal as you go so the flame doesn’t get too weak.”

Rimee Ruu, Lala Ruu, and Toor Deen were each entrusted with a single giba, while I was overseeing the whole operation. From an outsider’s perspective, the sight of us just roasting these whole giba in this empty space would probably be pretty surreal.

“Hmm, it sure is tranquil,” Dan Rutim said with a big yawn. “If nobody’s going to come by for a while, mind if I take a quick nap?”

“Go right ahead. You can take it easy until midday.”

Our trip to Dabagg had already proven that even if he fell asleep, he’d still react faster than any of us if an emergency were to arise. Dan Rutim sat down cross-legged with his back up against the tree Mim Cha was tied to, and in just a few seconds, he was already snoring.

“Everyone else can get some rest too, if you want. It was rough getting up so early today, wasn’t it?”

“Hmm? Now that I’m awake, I can’t get back to sleep that easily. And since it’s a break period right now, I don’t exactly have a lot of ways to even get tired,” Ludo Ruu said.

Now that I thought about it, Ludo Ruu had always been the type of guy to get up early. Shin Ruu didn’t look especially sleepy either as he chatted with Lala Ruu.

“Yesterday was so much fun! So we’re heading to Dora’s house again three days from now? I really hope I’m chosen again...” Lala Ruu remarked.

“Hmm. But didn’t Asuta say that different people should be chosen to head to the Daleim lands so that more of us could get to know them?” Shin Ruu asked, looking my way.

“That’s right,” I said, turning toward him as well. “But at the same time, I feel like we make a stronger bond if we visited with the same people, so it’s a real tough call.”

“Yeah! Rimee and I got along best with Tara, so leaving us on duty would be for the best, wouldn’t it?” Lala Ruu said. However, she quickly looked over at

Toor Deen in a fluster. “Oh, but I’m not saying I think you should be taken out of the running. Please don’t take this the wrong way, all right?”

“Okay,” Toor Deen replied with a tender smile. Looking back, there had been a bond between those two ever since the clan head meeting. I could sense that even if she acted reserved, Toor Deen was definitely fond of Lala Ruu. “If Reina Ruu or Yun Sudra want to participate, I’d be fine with yielding my spot to them. And I can help out in the morning like this even if I don’t get to stay at Dora’s place...”

“Yeah, it isn’t like this is our last chance! Even without the festival, as long as we’re on a break period, it should be okay to go visit them.”

“Huh? But...wouldn’t that depend on how Dora’s family feels about it?”

“They were happy to have us! But we probably shouldn’t be imposing on them all the time, so we should invite some of them to the forest’s edge again too.”

“Yeah! I’d love to have Tara stay at the Ruu house this time!” Rimee Ruu chimed in, causing things to get even more lively. At this rate, even though this monotonous task would take several hours, it seems like we would be able to endure it just fine. That was what I was thinking about as I checked the strength of everyone’s flames, when Ai Fa suddenly called out, “Asuta.” Following her gaze, I noticed a small black and scarlet figure approaching in the pale morning light.

“My, you guys from the forest’s edge sure did get here early.” It was Pino the acrobat. With the scarlet sleeves of her haori fluttering as she walked, she came and stood in front of us.

“And you’re roasting whole giba? How truly grand.”

“Yeah. We heard that whole roast kimyuus were given away on holidays, so we wanted to do the same with giba.”

“Excellent! I hope that you’ll share some with us as well,” Pino said, stifling a yawn as she spoke. She had an odd mixture of innocence and sensuality about her, and remained just as mysterious as always.

As it was Shin Ruu’s first time meeting her, he was currently staring at her,

looking kind of amazed. After shooting him a glare out of the corner of her eye, Lala Ruu turned Pino's way.

"You're up rather early yourself. Aren't you forbidden from doing business during the day too?"

"Oh right, they do have a rule like that in place. Well, even if it's taboo to earn money, we can still liven things up with our flutes and drums." Then, Pino's pitch-black eyes looked over toward me. "By the way, are you going to come see our nighttime performance as planned today?"

"That's right. It's our first time running the stalls at night, so our schedule still isn't completely determined, but I believe we should be able to."

"Glad to hear it. And we'll use the time we have between performances to buy some of your cooking. I'll see you again once those are all roasted."

With that comment, Pino went and fluttered away.

"Hmm. She doesn't seem to be a bad person, but that doesn't change the fact that she's suspicious," Lala Ruu bluntly stated, and then she glared once more at Shin Ruu. "So, how long are you going to keep staring blankly like that? What, is she your type or something?"

"I wasn't staring blankly. I was just caught off guard by how peculiar she was. And besides, I could never feel that way about someone from town..."

"Hmph, really?" Lala Ruu shot back, clearly miffed. As someone who didn't look all that different in terms of age, it seemed she couldn't turn a blind eye toward Pino.

At any rate, the whole roast giba were cooking steadily. The surface gradually started browning nicely, as the fat that dripped down onto the braziers crackled. Soon enough, they'd start giving off quite an appetizing aroma.

However, there weren't any passersby for the time being, and the empty town remained terribly quiet.

The silence was only broken roughly three hours later, when the sundial I had brought along was just about reaching the upper fifth hour. It was then that a group came by with some carts.

“Whoa, that’s amazing! You really are roasting whole giba!” One of them was Yumi from The Westerly Wind. After some morning greetings, she energetically continued. “Still, they’re awfully small. Are these young ones?”

“Yeah. If they were bigger, it would take too long to roast them.”

After that, other people started steadily filling in the open spaces with stalls at regular intervals, shooting us nervous looks as they approached. They must have been tasked with running stalls for the whole roast kimyuus. Naturally, they were all westerners.

“Mmm, what a great smell! If you only have three of them, I’m sure they’ll run out in no time, though,” Yumi said.

“I’ll be disappointed if we have leftovers, but I’d be perfectly happy if they do go quickly. I’m starting to get a bit worried about how few people are around...”

“You’ve got no need to worry. Once the sun hits its peak and the kimyuus are roasted, you’ll get swarms of hungry folks wandering this way!”

There was someone tugging on Yumi’s arm from behind as she cheerfully smiled at me. It was her friend, who had been helping her run the stall for The Westerly Wind. She looked to be around the same age as Yumi, and as I recalled, her name was Luia.

“Hmm? What is it?”

The girl seemed more timid than Yumi. With her eyes fixed on us, she quietly whispered something.

“Ah, I see,” Yumi remarked in an even more amused voice.

“Is something wrong, Yumi?”

“Nah, not really. She just wants to say hi to those guys over there too,” Yumi replied as they walked over to Lala Ruu’s stall. “Hey there, Lala Ruu. You’re working hard this morning.”

“Yeah... You too.” The two of them should have been fairly close by now, but the third Ruu daughter still looked rather displeased, perhaps because of some lingering feelings about what happened earlier.

Then, Yumi’s gaze swiftly shifted from Lala to Shin Ruu.

“Hey, you’ve been coming to the post town for a while now, right? I’m Yumi. What’s your name?”

“I am Shin Ruu...”

“Oh, you’re a member of the Ruu clan too? So, are you Ludo Ruu’s big brother?”

“Ludo Ruu is the son of my father’s older brother.”

“Oh, I see,” Yumi replied with a smile, then pointed behind her with her thumb. “This girl here is Luia. Hopefully we’ll all keep on seeing one another.”

“Hmm?” Shin Ruu questioned with a tilt of his head, his gaze shifting toward Yumi’s friend. Half hidden behind Yumi’s back, Luia’s cheeks had turned red.

Shin Ruu didn’t seem to have grasped the situation at all, but Lala Ruu’s red head of hair seemed to be bristling next to him. Was it the glow of the flames in the brazier that were making her look like she was burning?



“Yumi, could I talk to you for a moment?” Immediately seeing straight through this dangerous situation, I hurriedly beckoned to Yumi. Taking care that her friend wouldn’t overhear, I explained the delicate relationship between Lala and Shin Ruu as precisely as possible.

“Hmm? I don’t think Luia has any particularly strong feelings for the people of the forest’s edge. She just wants to get closer to that Shin Ruu guy because he’s so handsome.”

“Even so, the people of the forest’s edge can be awfully exacting, so I’m just trying to make sure this doesn’t lead to any awkward issues down the line.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll try to indirectly hint to her later that she should give up on him.”

The whole time we were whispering to each other, that Luia girl was passionately staring at Shin Ruu.

Just a few months ago, someone from Genos falling for a person of the forest’s edge would have been utterly inconceivable. Perhaps it was simply a sign of how much the relationship between both sides had been improving...but considering the time when Reina Ruu turned down Leeheim from the house of Saturas, it could definitely lead to some friction. Shin Ruu had Lala Ruu to think about as well, so this wasn’t a welcome situation for anyone.

It’s true that Shin Ruu seems even more mellow than even Ludo Ruu or Rau Lea. I guess that makes him more approachable for townsfolk.

Now that I thought about it, Ai Fa had been hit on by that ridiculous minstrel just the other day, so I couldn’t help but sympathize with how Lala Ruu was feeling.

While that was going on, we started seeing more and more people out on the road. Since the other stalls were still empty, ours attracted plenty of attention.

“Ooh, so this is a giba? It’s smaller than I expected.”

“It must be a young one. Otherwise, westerners would never be so afraid of the things.”

Those comments had been made by some people from Jagar. Even so, most

westerners probably hadn't actually seen a giba either. The beasts tended to avoid humans, and the only time they'd come near a settlement would be to raid their fields at night, so there were a whole lot of people in the crowd who looked curious when they saw us.

Though they were few in number, some westerners were terrified enough to outright flee in terror. Even if these were young giba with their horns and tusks removed, they were still pretty frightening. I just hoped that I could do something to lessen that fear at least a little.

To most people, giba were dangerous and harmful pests. However, it wasn't as if they were monsters. Their meat was delicious, and you wouldn't grow horns from eating it, nor would your skin turn darker. Just like the people of the forest's edge weren't unreasonable barbarians, giba weren't living natural disasters either. They were just animals, and I wanted to convey that fact to the people of Genos.

Soon, the sundial finally hit the upper fifth hour, and a cheer arose from the crowd. There were now carriages approaching from the north.

They were being led by a member of the ducal guard, clad in white armor. Though it wasn't Melfried—the leader of the organization—the slightly less showy tassels on his helmet caused me to figure he was probably a company or platoon commander.

“Citizens of the post town, and guests to fair Genos! The sun god's downfall and revival approaches at last, coming just ten days from now!” the officer stated in a clear voice, rousing the crowd even further. “Today, to celebrate the day of dawn, Duke Marstein Genos offers you this food and drink! Take this kimyuus meat and mamaria wine and celebrate the sun god's revival!”

The doors of the carriages filling the road were then opened, and a large number of wooden boxes and casks were brought out. Workers lined up the casks of fruit wine, and the boxes packed with kimyuus meat were distributed to the people waiting at the stalls. The members of the crowd who were interested in the fruit wine seemed to have brought their own cups.

“To the sun god!” the crowd cheered in unison as their drinks were poured one after another. With a sidelong glance at the jubilation, the group from the

castle solemnly proceeded to the south. They must have been heading to distribute meat and wine over at the inn area as well. It would be hard to cook enough to feed the whole town with the stalls alone, so they'd be making use of the kitchens at the inns as well.

"Hmm. Offering fruit wine in the middle of the day? That's really something," Dan Rutim remarked as he returned to the stalls, seemingly having been awoken by the commotion.

"Would you like to go get some too, Dan Rutim? I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem for your guard work if you did." That had also been proven back at the clan head meeting and during our trip to Dabagg.

"Naturally, I'd be perfectly fine even if I did drink a little, but I'm not fond of the idea of being given something without paying for it."

"Is that so? But we're offering giba meat for free too, so I'd say that puts us in the same boat," I replied.

Dan Rutim's eyes sparkled as he said, "Really? Now that you mentioned it, you're completely right! If we're offering up three whole giba, then there's no reason not to drink as much fruit wine as we like!"

And so, Dan Rutim took a deep wooden plate I offered him and headed off merrily toward the street.

The settlement at the forest's edge was part of the Genos domain as well, at least on paper. It shouldn't have been any issue for the people of the forest's edge to partake in the fruit wine offered by the lord of the land, but I still felt it would be rather rare for one of them to cross that line like Dan Rutim was doing now.

Some folks looked taken aback by the former Rutim clan head charging in like that, but he was soon handed his fruit wine with a smile. The southerners in particular showed no fear of his large figure, and happily clinked their drinking vessels with his.

"Sorry, but I'm going to step away for a moment," I stated, taking a glance over at the street and moving over to Yumi's stall. Naturally, Ai Fa followed along, and we peeked in on how they were doing.

“Oh? What is it, Asuta?”

“I was just interested in seeing how a whole roast kimyuus was handled.”

Just like with our giba, the kimyuus had been pierced all the way through on metal skewers and then cooked. However, they were only around the size of a rabbit or a chicken, so the kimyuus stalls were roasting three of them at a time.

The kimyuus had been cleaned, with their heads and feathers removed. It might not have technically been a whole roast without their heads, but considering that the wings—which were attached to the bird’s neck—were sold for a high price, it made sense that they wouldn’t be given away like this. In lieu of that, the kimyuus had been delivered with their skin still on the meat.

“I see. Kimyuus with skin sounds like quite a feast.”

“Right? We poor folk only ever get to eat the stuff at times like this!”

Just like with karon, kimyuus pelts were used in leatherwork. Their meat had a light flavor all throughout, like chicken tenders, so with the skin removed and not much fat to speak of, it was seriously bland. But when whole-roasted with skin on, it was worthy of being called a fine feast.

Few people in the post town used charcoal regularly, so the air around the stalls was quickly becoming thick with smoke. It was like they were smoking the meat rather than roasting it. But there was a refreshing smell mixed in, so they must have been burning some sort of herb like lilo too.

“Ours will be fully cooked by the time the sun hits its peak! Will your giba be ready in time?”

“Yeah, probably. At the very least, we shouldn’t be too late.”

“I’m looking forward to it! Can we have some too?”

As we were talking, a wagon approached from the south. At first I thought the group from before had returned, but it was a covered wagon rather than a carriage—the one belonging to the Ruu clan, which was pulled by Ruuruu.

“Sorry for being late. We finally finished our work at home.”

They were the reinforcements for our stalls. The group included Reina and Sheera Ruu, as well as Sufira Zaza, acting as an observer. However, the hunters

accompanying them really surprised me. Rau Lea was a common enough sight, but Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim were also there.

“Th-This is the first time you’ve come out here like this, isn’t it, Jiza Ruu?”

“Yes. Our clan head, Donda, ordered me to come observe the state of the post town,” Jiza Ruu calmly stated, and it was just as impossible as always to read how he was feeling from his calm expression. “I will be accompanying you tonight as well. Nothing has changed with Rimee and Lala, has it?”

“No, of course not.”

Though this was quite a surprise, it was a good one. As the heir of one of the leading clan heads, Jiza Ruu valued the laws of the forest’s edge above all else, and now he had finally come to observe the post town. I figured I’d have to introduce him to Yumi, but when I glanced around, I found her already smiling and talking to Gazraan Rutim.

“It’s been a while, Gazraan Rutim! Are you doing all right?”

“Yes. And I’m glad to find you looking well too, Yumi.”

Before I knew it, I kind of ended up staring at them blankly.

“U-Um, the two of you know each other?”

Gazraan Rutim started to respond, but Yumi beat him to it. “We sure do. When that noble girl abducted you, the people of the forest’s edge all came to the post town, right? We met back then!”

“Indeed. Yumi guided me around the backstreets of the post town.”

It was quite a shock to learn that these two people I was so close to already knew one another. They looked to be quite happy to be reunited, at that.

“This is my first time meeting you, though. You look like you must be a very impressive hunter, from what I can tell,” Yumi remarked as she looked over at Jiza Ruu. Despite being flustered, I jumped in to play my part.

“Yumi, this is the eldest son of the main Ruu house, Jiza Ruu. Jiza Ruu, this is the daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind, Yumi. She’s visited the Ruu settlement before too.”

Jiza Ruu silently nodded at Yumi. With his narrow eyes fixed on her, Yumi flashed him a grin, showing the whites of her teeth.

“If you’re from the main Ruu house, then you’re Rimee and Ludo Ruu’s big brother, right? You really don’t look very much alike.”

It was hard to tell if he was disagreeing or not, but Jiza Ruu nodded once more before moving on, bringing their wagon over to the stall where his siblings were waiting.

Yumi sighed as she watched him go. “Even though he was smiling, that guy was seriously intense. Still, I guess it makes perfect sense, considering who his father is.”

“Yeah. But I’d say the second son, Darmu Ruu, is the one who most resembles their father.”

“Darmu Ruu’s that guy who was sitting next to his father and keeping a close eye on us when we visited the forest’s edge, right? They really did seem a lot alike!”

I found Yumi’s bluntness to be really reassuring. I felt like I really could say the rift between Genos and the forest’s edge had been bridged for the first time, if she was able to accept not only sociable men like Ludo Ruu and Gazraan Rutim, but even hunters like Jiza and Darmu Ruu, not to mention Gulaf Zaza and Deek Dom.

With that thought running through my head, I went ahead and headed back to my post alongside Ai Fa.

2

By the time the sun hit its peak, both the giba and kimyuus meat had been fully roasted.

“Thanks for waiting! Feel free to come get some!” I shouted out, and the folks who had been crowding around the road hurried our way with incredible speed.

There was now an even bigger and more lively crowd flowing through than usual, just as Yumi had said there would be. Some were travelers from the east

or south, or even from other towns in the west, not to mention the citizens of Genos who were taking time off from their businesses.

The fruit wine had already been handed out, so the crowd was even more cheerful than usual, with endless shouts of, “To the sun god!” here and there along the street.

Once the whole roast giba were ready, we had to put out the braziers, replace the stalls’ top surfaces and their hole covers, and lay out suurub leaves over the workstation so nothing would get dirty. Then Toor Deen and the other two in charge of the stalls brought out some metal skewers and meat carving knives and began cutting up the meat. As they worked, the meat they were serving up on several large plates steadily vanished bit by bit.

Everyone was bringing their own plates, wooden spoons, metal skewers, and so on. It seemed that not only whole roast kimyuus meat but also various soups were being served, as I saw folks here and there walking along while slurping some down.

Though normally our outdoor restaurant space was only open to customers purchasing giba cooking, today we opened it to everyone. The folks seated there would raise their voices in celebration, or even start singing songs from this world that I didn’t know. It must have been a song extolling the sun god. It was quite rousing, and yet also somehow idyllic. The melody had a strangely nostalgic feel to it too.

“Are you all doing okay?” I called out to the stalls on either side of me, getting back a series of energetic affirmative replies.

Reina and Rimee Ruu were working one stall and Sheera and Lala Ruu were taking care of another where they were working together to carve the roasted meat.

Since it had been roasted until it was nice and tender, the meat was easy to remove from the bone. However, it was too hot to be touched directly, making it much more difficult to handle. But sure enough, it looked incredibly tasty. The vegetables packed into their abdomens had come out very nice, with much of their moisture gone. The chatchi and taro-like ma gigo in particular came out all soft and flakey, which was enough to make anyone crave them, not just Ludo

Ruu.

“Hey there. Looks like you’re got quite a bit of excitement around here after all, Asuta.” When I heard that voice, I looked up, and found Dora standing there smiling at me. It wasn’t just Tara with him today, but also his two sons, his wife, and his oldest son’s wife. “Sorry we’re so late. We’re all done with work for today, so now we can have all the fun we want!”

Looking closely, I could tell that Dora’s face was already red from drinking.

At the same time, Dan Rutim came back over from the crowd in the road. “Well, if it isn’t Dora! You certainly took your time getting here.”

“Hello, Dan Rutim! To the sun god!”

The two clinked their plate and cup together, then chugged down the contents. They seemed to be enjoying themselves even more than they had last night.

“Asuta, I’m getting hungry too! Cut me off some giba meat!” Dan Rutim said.

“All right. I made sure to leave some just for you.”

I cut some rib meat off the right side of one of the giba, which I had intentionally left untouched. Then I placed it on a large plate, still on the bone, and offered it to Dan Rutim and Dora’s family.

Although not even thirty minutes had passed, over seventy percent of the giba’s body was now nothing but bones. It had only been around thirty kilos or so to begin with, and after all the moisture and fat that it had lost, that must have fallen to about twenty-two or twenty-three, but it had still gone as fast as at the celebratory banquet at the Ruu settlement. The stalls to my left and right seemed to be struggling a bit more with the cutting and were moving at a slower pace, but even so, half of the meat they were offering had already been eaten.

“It really is incredibly busy around here. It was crowded over by the inns too, but I think this far northern section is the most packed part of the stall area,” Dora’s older son remarked with a kind smile. Tara had run over to Rimee Ruu’s stall, and then she went to deliver the meat she received over to Yumi.

It truly was even more hectic than usual. The street was completely packed with people, and there was just as much enthusiasm in the air here as I had seen at the banquets at the forest's edge.

There were some drunkards getting into fights here and there, but the guards quickly settled any such incidents. They had increased their patrols, and there looked to be even more of them deployed than usual.

"Oh my, it seems we really did show up late. Is there still enough left for us?"

The Gamley Troupe had returned once more.

It was a group of five—the acrobat, Pino; the strongman, Doga; the flute player, Nachara; the beast tamer, Shantu; and the tall guy, Dilo, whose act I still hadn't seen.

"Welcome. We should still have enough left."

"Glad to hear it. Could you make ours an extra tasty bit?"

"Got it. Is everyone else not around?"

"Those fools had all sorts of complaints about stuff like not wanting to eat in front of people, or not liking such large crowds even though we're all performers. Well, they can just go ahead and chew on jerky in the dark if that's how they feel."

So they had eight stubborn people like that in their group of thirteen? Now that she mentioned it, I got the feeling that a lot of performers could be surprisingly introverted and gloomy.

"Ah, you're that beast tamer! Those delightful animals aren't with you?" Dan Rutim called out after toasting with Dora, and Shantu responded with a deeply wrinkled yet cheerful smile.

"If we were to bring them out of the tent, the guards would scold us for it. They're over that way, eating uncooked kimyuus meat."

"It's a shame they have to live such constrained lives! Such powerful beasts must yearn to have wide-open spaces they can run around in!"

"That's just how it has to be in town. But when we're traveling, we let them run free where they won't frighten anyone."

The crowd in the area around us was also listening to Dan Rutim and Shantu's conversation with great interest. It seemed that people as outlandish as these traveling performers were difficult to approach for the townsfolk. Dan Rutim's sociability really was something else.

Meanwhile, since Jiza Ruu was watching them, Ludo Ruu and Rau Lea had to behave themselves and just observe the goings-on from near the stalls. However, occasionally someone would call out from the road and Ludo Ruu would respond with a bright smile.

After they had had their fill of giba meat, Pino's group pulled out their instruments, to the great delight of the crowd. Shantu left us, while the little guy, Zan, and the twins came in to replace him. Together, they all started playing a tune that didn't sound like it was from around here. When they later switched to performing that song I didn't know the name of—the one celebrating the sun god—the crowd began singing along.

"Still, I never knew that giba meat was this delicious!" one of the folks eating some of the last remaining bits of our roast said to me. The man had dark-brown hair and a skin color that made me figure he was a westerner. "We only just arrived here in Genos last night, but we heard talk at the inn about how popular giba cooking has become, so we decided we had to come over here. But, man, it was still such a shock."

"Is that so? Normally, we run our stalls during the day, but on holidays like this, we'll be open at night instead, so please feel free to stop by then."

"Yeah. We visited Genos half a year ago, so I know you've been serving giba cooking from your stalls since then," the man remarked with a smile while holding up a large metal cup full of wine. "Back then, we figured giba meat was inedible and just ignored it, but it seems we were just being stupid. If you're going to be open for business tonight, we'll be sure to hurry over."

"Great, thank you."

For a lot of our customers, this was their first experience with giba meat. Looking over at Reina and Sheera Ruu's stall, it looked like even more people than usual were calling out to them too.

"The post town is so incredibly busy during the revival festival," a voice said

from behind us. It was Gazraan Rutim, who had just been silently watching over the proceedings until now. “I’m surprised to see how the westerners are acting around us as well. It’s been quite a while since I last came to the post town.”

“Yeah. But since only folks who aren’t afraid of the people of the forest’s edge come around here, that probably makes the change feel more pronounced.”

“Even so, despite having this many hunters gathered, hardly anyone is looking at us with fear in their eyes. Such a thing would have been unthinkable before now. And my father, Dan, is blending in so smoothly, it’s almost like he’s one of the townsfolk himself.”

“That’s because your father has a great personality,” I remarked, breaking out in a smile without thinking. Gazraan Rutim gave me an affable grin of his own in response.

Meanwhile, Jiza Ruu and Sufira Zaza were standing behind us. What were they thinking about, watching over all of this? And what about the leading clan heads who were waiting for their return, back in the settlement at the forest’s edge?

In order to have more prosperous lives, the people of the forest’s edge should sell giba meat in town... The validity of that viewpoint, which Ai Fa and I had advanced, would without a doubt be carefully scrutinized come the next clan head meeting.

That day of judgment was fast approaching, just half a year off.

3

“Well then, let’s head on back to the forest’s edge.”

The whole roast giba had all been eaten by the townsfolk before the lower first hour arrived, without so much as a scrap remaining. Though I had wanted to enjoy the festive atmosphere a little longer, we would be visiting the post town again in the evening and needed to finish our preparations beforehand. Besides, we got to take in the celebratory ambience on our way back to The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Just as Dora’s older son had said, our part of the stall area really did seem to

be the most lively, but all of the stalls spread out beside the street still had folks gathered around them. When we arrived at the inn area after getting past all that, we found that the streets there were even more packed.

Most of the inns had chairs and tables set up outside, where folks were making merry. Grilled kimyuus meat was being brought out to them constantly from the inns' kitchens. I couldn't even begin to hazard a guess as to how many kimyuus had been slaughtered for today.

A red flag which I didn't usually see was being displayed on the fronts of the inns. Was that another one of the townsfolk's customs for celebrating the sun god? At any rate, the aroma of grilled meat and fruit wine filled the streets, and it felt as if the whole town was intoxicated.

Thanks to the overwhelming commotion, we didn't actually attract that much attention, pulling our three stalls and two wagons. But since we had seven hunters with blades accompanying us, it was only natural that we did get at least a few nervous looks. We even saw a couple people who stopped and stared in shock, looking like they were about to drop their fruit wine at any moment.

Amid all that, we did have a moment of tension when some kids running around through the crowd almost bumped into Jiza Ruu. The eldest Ruu son dodged out of their way before that could happen, of course, but one of the children was so surprised by the hunter's agility that he got completely distracted and kind of just kept going on momentum until he tumbled to the ground.

Jiza Ruu looked down upon the child with narrowed eyes, seemingly still smiling even when he actually wasn't. However, being over 180 centimeters tall with a muscular build and wearing a hunter's cloak made from a giba pelt, he must have looked as intimidating to that child sitting there in the dirt as the strongman, Doga, did to me. I could see it on his face; the kid was clearly terrified. But just before he broke down sobbing, Ludo Ruu scooped him up from behind.

"You need to be careful to watch where you're going when you're running around like that. If a tolos kicked you or something, you could have gotten

seriously hurt.”

The boy’s teary eyes turned to focus on Ludo Ruu. The youngest son of the Ruu was grinning widely, as always, and rustled the child’s hair. “Boys shouldn’t cry over something like this. Are you hurt anywhere?”

“Ah, he scraped his knee. It’s bleeding a bit,” Lala Ruu remarked, having left her stall to lean over in front of the child.

Just then, a middle-aged woman came running on over after pushing her way through the crowd.

“U-U-Um, that’s my child, so...”

“I see. It looks like he hurt his knee, so you should treat it before it gets any worse,” Ludo Ruu said, smiling at the woman. Even if the young Ruu hunter was a man of the forest’s edge, his grin was always wonderfully charming. The woman ended up giving him a teary smile in return, her face still pale as she scooped up her son. “And you guys, if you want to play tag, you should pick a place that’s more open,” Ludo Ruu called out to the other children standing about, and they all broke out in bashful smiles.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, we resumed pushing the stalls. Ludo Ruu just strolled along with his hands together behind his head, while Jiza Ruu seemed to be staring at his younger brother.

“Wow, the Mas family’s inn is really busy too!” Rimee Ruu exclaimed as we approached The Kimyuus’s Tail. I wasn’t used to hearing them called the Mas family, but, well, she wasn’t wrong. To Rimee Ruu and the others, it was probably the westerners who didn’t have family names who were the strange ones.

At any rate, The Kimyuus’s Tail certainly did seem to be bustling. Various inns around the post town had been tasked with serving the kimyuus meat and fruit wine distributed by the castle, not including the ones with owners who were too lazy to bother with all that work. There were tables and chairs set up in front of the participating inns, where most of the customers were enjoying themselves while drinking wine.

“So, you all already gave away all your giba meat? Good work!” one familiar

pot seller called out to us. Seated beside him was the cloth dealer. They were acquaintances of Dora's whom I had been introduced to way back when I first opened my stall for business, making them some of my oldest regulars. "That whole roast giba really was incredibly delicious! I only had a single slice, since I didn't want to cheat anyone else out of it, but I could have easily filled my belly completely with that stuff!"

"Thank you. I hope we'll see you again on the day of the sun's peak."

"Of course you will! Ah, good work to you all from the Ruu clan too!"

Our regulars understood the fact that after a certain point, the Ruu clan had branched off from the Fa to open their own business. Reina Ruu and the rest of them answered the man's greeting with smiles of their own.

"Ah, Asuta and Reina Ruu, good work," Telia Mas chimed in with a smile as she carried food out of her family's inn. Unsurprisingly, she had whole roast kimyuus atop a large wooden plate, and the salty-sweet aroma of tau oil and myamuu was wafting off it.

At stalls like Yumi's, they had just whole roast kimyuus pickled in salt, but it seemed the inns were all using their own particular tricks. Naturally, they had to pay for the ingredients used, but if it meant they stood out more, it was sure to attract additional business. The fruit wine they were handing out in cups seemed to be cut with fruit juice.

"We just had a customer from Jagar ask if we were serving any giba meat. Apparently, they're offering both kimyuus and giba at The Great Southern Tree."

"Huh? They're serving the giba without charge, right?"

"That's correct. Apparently, things are really bustling over there, thanks to that."

By serving giba meat for free like we had done, The Great Southern Tree must have been planning to draw attention to itself. Naudis really was a step ahead of everyone else when it came to business dealings.

"My apologies, but could you just leave the stalls out in front of the storehouse? We'll handle them when we get a chance," Telia Mas directed us.

“Got it. Well then, we’ll see you again in the evening.”

After that, we returned the stalls, then headed straight for the settlement at the forest’s edge.

We made it back just a little before the lower first hour rolled around, but our long day was only just beginning. From now until night fell, we had to focus entirely on handling the prep work for the meals we would be selling from our stalls and delivering to the inns.

For the duration of the revival festival, we would be splitting up and rotating who handled the cooking for the inns. Today, the Fa clan was taking care of The Sledgehammer, while the Ruu were in charge of The Kimyuus’s Tail and The Great Southern Tree. We had planned things out so that our groups would alternate between being in charge of one inn or two. It took a fair bit of effort to handle all three together, so my plan was to keep up this rotation until the revival festival ended.

At any rate, we quickly got to work.

For The Sledgehammer, that meant preparing 60 servings of the giba sauté arrabbiata, then for the stalls we would be making 160 poitan wraps, 200 giba and nanaar carbonara, and 120 of the daily special, tarapa stew. Then, in whatever time we had left over, we needed to work on making more curry base and pasta too.

But, well, among those dishes, the poitan wraps and giba and nanaar carbonara were prepared on-site, so it would all work out. Baking the poitan was left to the chefs who had remained here, and we had already made the sauce for the poitan wraps yesterday. Since pasta took some time to prepare, we were keeping those dishes at the usual number, while raising the poitan wraps and daily specials by twenty meals each.

Also, the tarapa stew was an Italian-styled dish. The Ruu clan were preparing giba hot pot stew and myamuu giba for today, so there was no worry about overloading our menu with tarapa. With that in mind, I wanted to go with a dish that really centered around the stuff.

For the base, I used a revision of the tarapa sauce recipe we had been making for a long time, with aria and myamuu finely chopped and sautéed in reten oil,

which was then stewed together with tarapa and fruit wine, and finally the taste was adjusted with salt and pico leaves. For a bit of subtle seasoning, I added tau oil and sugar, as well as an herb from Sym that seemed rather close to basil.

As for the meat, I used rib meat and thigh meat, sixty grams each, cut into large chunks. After adding salt and pico leaves for a base seasoning, I grilled just the surfaces, then boiled them fully in the sauce afterward.

For vegetables, I went with aria, tino, nenon, ro'hyoi, ma pula, and chan, a variety just as lavish as the teriyaki meat stew. Also, once it was served up on a plate, we would add grated gyama dried milk on top.

I had been diligently building up experience with tarapa-based dishes ever since I had prepared that stew for the Rutim banquet way back when and first opened my stall serving giba burgers. It was the vegetable I was most familiar with, in all my experience using unfamiliar tools and ingredients, and all the trial and error I'd gone through.

Reina and Sheera Ruu had come up with a wonderful dish using tarapa sauce as a base—their teriyaki meat stew. That had spurred me on with a craving to create the absolute best tarapa dish I could prepare at the moment too.

I figured that even if some customers had stew or giba burgers from the Ruu clan the following day, it would still be completely satisfying for them, so I held nothing back in making a dish I could feel proud of.

Personally, I felt that Reina and Sheera Ruu were just as important as Myme and Varkas for me to keep an eye on. I hoped that we could all have a friendly rivalry, spurring one another forward to make the greatest dishes we could. With that wish firmly in mind, I once again gave my all to handling the day's work.

"You look like you're enjoying yourself, Asuta..." Ai Fa said as I boiled the contents of a pot. As she didn't have anything to do but help carry stuff, she had been seated next to the stove for a while now, just staring at me as I worked.

"Yeah, of course I am. Why do you bring it up?"

"No particular reason. Just giving voice to a thought that crossed my mind."

I figured she might have been lamenting her inability to work as a hunter right now, but her eyes seemed surprisingly gentle. I couldn't help but notice my heart had started pounding just from looking at her.

"You sort of look like you're enjoying yourself too, Ai Fa."

"Hmm? If my clan member is happy, then so am I. That much should go without saying at this point."

As the sunlight shone down on her, filtered through the trees, her golden hair sparkled. I seemed like Ai Fa's charms had grown even stronger since last night, and I was starting to get worked up. However, it was a blissful, warm sensation causing me to feel that way inside.

I really do adore Ai Fa...

That all-too-obvious thought blew through my heart like a summer breeze.

As time steadily passed on by, the hour of our next job drew ever closer.

4

We headed back to the post town in the second half of the lower fourth hour.

The fact that each hour was roughly seventy minutes tended to confuse things for me, but if I had to convert that, it should have been something like 5:15 in the afternoon.

The sun set at the lower sixth hour, or about 7:00 in the evening. Since I didn't want to get back too late, the plan was to open for business at the lower fifth hour, then close up shop around two hours later.

That would give us just 140 minutes or so of work time, which was an hour less than our usual business days, but I still felt we shouldn't lower the amount of food we prepared. The simple reason for that was because folks ate around one and a half times as much for dinner as they did for a midday snack here in Genos. That meant customers who would normally be satisfied with two portions would very likely want three instead, causing our sales to go one and a half times as fast.

Naturally, how many customers we would get at night remained a complete

unknown, but I was prepared to extend things by an hour if worse came to worst. Even if the people of the forest's edge tended to turn in early, I was sure the extension wouldn't be enough to ruin their sleep, so that was the plan we were going with.

At any rate, we had managed to somehow finish up our preparations and arrive at the post town on schedule, but the place remained just as packed as it had been around noon. This was our first time coming to town at such an hour, so we didn't really have a normal baseline to compare things to, but regardless, it certainly was lively.

The tables and chairs in front of the inns had been cleaned up, as the time when meat and fruit wine were being handed out had long since passed, but folks still looked to be in wonderfully high spirits as they came and went along the street. Perhaps there were a lot of people who had been planning to arrive here in Genos at night, as even more of the crowd than usual seemed to have wagons and traveler's cloaks.

At any rate, we went ahead and got things ready for business.

Just like always, we split into groups and headed off in different directions. Some of us would go to borrow the stalls while the others delivered supplies to the inns. The hunters guarding us divided themselves up as well.

We kept the number of chefs the same at fourteen, but since doing business at night was an unfamiliar situation, we went up to thirteen guards. With Sufira Zaza joining us as an observer on top of that, we ended up with a group of twenty-eight. We dealt with it by carrying six people in each of our four wagons, and Mim Cha and the Lea clan's totos each had two riders. It was our biggest group yet.

Among the guards, I was most familiar with Ai Fa, Bartha, Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, Rau Lea, Dan Rutim, Jiza Ruu, and Gazraan Rutim. Then on top of that, we had Darmu Ruu, Ji Maam, and Giran Ririn. Rounding out the group were two hunters whose names I didn't know from the Muufa and Min, which meant we had people from all seven of the clans under the Ruu.

Even more shocking was the fact that we had all three sons of the main Ruu house with us. The palm of Darmu Ruu's right hand still hadn't healed, but since

his left shoulder was all better, he apparently had no issue acting as a guard.

Incidentally, in addition to Sheera and Rimee Ruu who were scheduled to be on duty, the Ruu clan had also added Lala Ruu to their group. Apparently, she had traded places with a Lea woman because she wanted to go see the Gamley Troupe too.

With our group all gathered back together, we set about getting ready for business. We had left the outdoor restaurant open, and though there was fruit juice and juices from the meat spilled across the tables, we found that fortunately none of the chairs had been stolen.

Those of us in charge got the metal trays and the food heating up, while those with their hands free set about cleaning the restaurant space. Since the newer chefs had already had time to grow somewhat accustomed to the job, there didn't seem to be any real issues.

"Oh, so you're opening your stalls up at night today?" someone from a group of sharp-sighted fellows from Jagar called out as they approached.

"Yes. For the holidays, we'll be open at night as well. We're not permitted to do business during the day."

"Glad to hear it! The dining halls at the inns are sure to be packed, so we were just wondering where we'd eat!" They seemed really happy at the news.

"This is our first time opening for business at night. There seem to be a number of stalls selling goods, in addition to the ones selling food. Is that because it's a holiday?"

"Yeah. Normally, nobody would go out of their way to buy a pot or jar at night. But a lot of folks get carried away during the holidays, so the merchants try to make up for the earnings they lost during the day."

Compared to earlier in the day, about eighty percent as many stalls were currently open in the area. Rather than everyday goods, they seemed to be primarily selling beautiful fabrics and the like. However, some of the people working them seemed to be ignoring their businesses and just drinking away.

"Ooh, looks like it's just about the lower fifth hour," someone in the back of the group mumbled. When I turned to see what our customers were looking at,

I spotted a number of guards leading a large roofless wagon pulled by tolos toward the south.

The people crowding the street scattered, and the large wagon proceeded solemnly in our direction. Then, two of the guards stepped over and unloaded some luggage while holding long-handled spears.

“What are they doing?”

“Hmm? Ah, they’re getting ready for the fire. It’s a tradition unique to Genos.”

As we were talking, the guards had moved to a spot in front of our stalls and set down the things they were holding in the middle of the street: a really big armful of a bowl, a wooden frame around one and a half meters tall, and a leather cover stretched over the top. Once it got dark, they must have been planning to ignite some fuel in the bowl. The covering was probably there to prevent any issues from a sudden rain.

The guards left the braziers spaced out every seven to eight meters, right in the middle of the ten-meter-wide road. It wouldn’t prevent wagons from passing by, and there was no risk of fire spreading to any stalls or homes when they were placed there. However, this main stone-paved road stretched for several hundred meters just for the section that went through the post town. If they were leaving two guards at each interval all the way south, that would be an incredible number of personnel they needed.

“Since it’s a holiday, they’ve got more people than usual on duty. Normally, there aren’t many stalls out at night and everyone just gathers to the south, so they only set up fires there.”

“I see. And then once everyone’s asleep, they collect them?”

“That’s right. Of course, I’m always in bed by that time, so I’ve never seen it myself, but after those braziers are cleaned up, they apparently still have guards patrolling around with torches.”

Since outside of the castle town there weren’t any stone walls to protect against assailants, they just threw enough people at the area to prevent any problems. The Turan and Daleim lands were protected the same way, in

addition to the post town. While I had some rather bitter memories about the militia, I still had to admire the work they did.

While I was thinking about that, a guard returning from the northern extremity of town with a totos approached our stall.

“Hey, you lot are opening for business as well tonight?” It was the second platoon commander of the fifth unit assigned to the Saturas territory, Marth.

With a smile, I replied, “That’s right. Thanks for your service.”

“What a hassle. I’m begging you, please don’t make any additional work for me,” Marth said with a sullen expression as he gave a pained glance into the pot on top of the stall. “Still, there’s no denying that my stomach is responding to that aroma. So this is a tarapa stew of some sort?”

“It is. If you haven’t eaten yet, would you like to give it a try?”

“Don’t be foolish. As if I could purchase and eat food while on duty. Food is prepared for us by those assigned to the task back at the station.” But even as he spoke, Marth was staring regretfully into the pot. I was in charge of the new dish, the tarapa stew. The tarapa sauce was pleasantly sputtering away, giving off a truly alluring aroma. “Well then, since your shop is right across from *that lot*, take particular care not to cause any sort of trouble.” With that, Marth resolutely stood up straight and left.

By “that lot,” he had naturally meant the Gamley Troupe. Their massive tent stood there silently under the sky that was steadily turning crimson. It seemed they still hadn’t opened for business for the evening yet.

“Hey, we’re starving here. Are you still not ready?” one of the customers from Jagar pestered.

I looked over at the stalls to my left and right. Ama Min Rutim waved me on as the representative for the Ruu clan, while Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea nodded back.

“Right, we’re now open for business.”

It wasn’t as if we had dozens of people waiting around like usual. But there were a great number of passersby, even way up north here, so we soon had

folks crowding in at the usual rate. Furthermore, we had been able to communicate to the people on the street that we would be open for business today just by pulling our carts here, so we got a steady flow of folks approaching from the south, and before long we were even busier than usual.

Because of the anticipated crowd, we went ahead and put a halt to samples starting today, so I was able to focus on just dishing out one plate after another of tarapa stew. Ai Fa took on the job of accepting coins, as she was participating for the last time today. No matter how many customers crowded us, she calmly and precisely carried out her job, flawlessly playing the part of a cashier.

Then, just ten minutes after opening, Lala Ruu came running over to me.

“Asuta, we don’t have nearly enough seats! A bunch of people have started laying out mats in the vacant spaces over there. That’s against the rules, isn’t it?”

“Huh? Hmm, yeah. And if they’re eating from our plates, that makes it our responsibility.”

“Then I’ll go pay the inn to borrow those spaces! Sheera Ruu said that’s what we should do, but do you agree?”

“Yeah. The Fa and Ruu clans can each pay half.”

“Got it! Come with me, Shin Ruu!”

With that, Lala Ruu disappeared beyond the crowd.

It seemed we had had a bit of a slipup right from the start, with our eight stalls worth of space and eighty-four seats coming up completely short.

I don’t even know what to say. I might have really underestimated how intense the first day would be.

I had heard that the number of customers we could expect to see would double on the day of dawn, but between when we had first opened the outdoor restaurant and yesterday, we had already seen a near doubling on that front, so we hadn’t expected our crowd to increase this much even after that.

Of course, it was all because this was a holiday and the first day of the festival, but we needed to deal with it rather than just ignoring the fact that we were

breaking the laws of Genos. Since spaces could only be rented in ten-day increments, we had no choice but to make them officially ours for the duration, even if that would lead to us having excess space while running our business during the day.

Will we have enough plates? We stocked up on them in proportion to the number of seats we had, so the extras we purchased could end up running out quickly.

My personal job was serving the stew on deep-sided plates, so my work was much easier than yesterday's had been. However, the fact that things were moving along so smoothly might have been contributing to the shortage of seating. Giba steak and giba cutlets slowed down the flow of customers because they took time to prepare, and that had surely made things less strained in terms of our ability to accommodate our customers.



“What’s the matter, Asuta?” Ai Fa asked.

“Ah, I’m just regretting my own carelessness.”

“I see. While I don’t know what you’re referring to, if that is how you feel then it would undoubtedly be right for you to reflect upon it properly.”

“Yeah, that’s just what I’ll do.”

If nothing else, we’d at least have to order more tableware tomorrow. We had two more days of business at night ahead of us, so it certainly wouldn’t be a wasteful expense.

“We’re back! We went ahead and took care of the Fa clan’s portion, so you can just repay us later!” Lala Ruu said as she returned to the stalls, before hurrying back over to the restaurant space. We had just run out of plates on our end, so I politely apologized to the customers in line, entrusted the stall to Ai Fa, and then headed over that way myself.

“Whoa, this is really something else.”

Of course, the restaurant itself was full, but the people sitting on the ground beyond that were taking up almost the same amount of space all over again. Obviously, since they were eating with their food spread out in front of them, the space wasn’t being used as efficiently as in the restaurant. Compared to the eighty-four seats we had, there looked to be roughly fifty people crowded around there.

“Hey, cram in a little tighter over there! We didn’t borrow the space past here, so if you go beyond that, you’ll get dragged away by the guards!” Lala Ruu shouted as Shin Ruu helped her set up a rope. It did indeed seem to be the same size as the restaurant at eight spaces. They were jamming the grigee poles we used to carry pots into the ground in order to quickly construct the boundary.

“It’s really fortunate Lala Ruu is here today. The other women and I could never have acted so swiftly,” Sheera Ruu said from behind me while holding some empty wooden plates.

“But you’re the one who instructed her on what to do, aren’t you? That was a

good call on your part.”

“I wouldn’t say it was my doing. Because this means we’re now wasting eight red coins a day, I needed to confirm with you whether or not it was really the right decision, Asuta.”

“It absolutely was, I’d say. I’m just sorry I underestimated things so badly.”

“Please don’t go making a face like that. This is a job shared between the Fa and Ruu clans, isn’t it? We share both the same responsibility and the same honor from the task.”

After saying that, Sheera Ruu started washing tableware in a barrel filled with water. Since I needed that done before I could get back to work, I naturally helped out.

Rimee Ruu, Yun Sudra, and the Ratsu woman were walking all about the now-doubled space used by the restaurant as they collected empty plates. Ama Min Rutim had hurried over to join us too, leaving her stall to the Min woman, so she must have run out of plates just like I had.

“We’re planning on staying for an hour or two after sunset, aren’t we? But don’t you think we’ll end up finishing our work much earlier than that at this rate?” Sheera Ruu asked as her hands kept on moving.

“It must be around half past the lower fifth hour. Depending on how things go, I could definitely see us selling out within an hour of sunset at the sixth.”

“This is really wonderful, though. After all, it means we’ll be able to sell even more during the next holiday,” Sheera Ruu said, handing me the wooden plates and spoons she had washed. “That honor is shared between the Fa and Ruu clans. And I’m sure Jiza Ruu and Sufira Zaza must be even more surprised than we are.”

After taking in her reassuring smile, I headed back to my stall, where more than ten customers were lined up. I called out to them, saying, “Sorry for the wait!” and picked up my ladle.

The world was already awash in twilight. The ambient light was growing weaker, as the sky shifted from crimson to purple.

Around fifteen minutes or so after that, the guards standing interspersed along the road began lighting the braziers with lana leaves. Starting from the north, orange flames sprang into being one after another. The folks in our seating area and along the road cheered, “To the sun god!” in unison, as if they had been waiting for that.

I also noticed a series of flames off to the northwest. Those must have been fires that had been lit along the castle town wall in order to help them to keep watch. I had seen them before, when we were on our way back from Dabagg, and before even that, when I was liberated from the Turan manor. It was the light of a nightless city, illuminated without the aid of any electricity. If not for those flames, I surely would have been able to look up and spy constellations I didn’t recognize up in the sky.

Somehow, I felt as if something had grabbed hold of my heart. The smiles and cheering of the crowd, as well as the general excitement of the festival, kindled that feeling even further. It was a familiar sensation for me, which called to mind an occasion roughly three years back, in December of my second year in middle school.

I had participated in a local hunting club’s farming camp, where I prepared a wild boar for the first time in my life. It was a three-day event where I stayed overnight, which meant I spent the first night surrounded by all sorts of unfamiliar faces. I ended up finding it hard to sleep in the bedroom assigned to me, so I stared out the window up at the starry sky as I breathed out white clouds, and that was when I was captivated by the same sort of feeling I felt now. It was like being all alone in an unfamiliar land... A strangely refreshing, but complicated sensation that included both homesickness and a sense of release.

How are my old man and Reina doing these days?

I suddenly felt the strength draining from my legs, but just then, someone poked me in the shoulder. “Hey. Why are you looking so stupefied while you’re supposed to be working? Didn’t you say you needed to keep stirring that pot?” Ai Fa asked, her blue eyes staring my way.

In a fluster, I re-gripped the ladle and resumed my stirring. There was a

customer from Sym standing in front of me, but I had run out of plates again and couldn't serve him.

"Sorry, but I'm going to head back over to the restaurant again. Could you keep on stirring the pot?"

"Hold on," Ai Fa called out, grabbing my arm.

A poke was one thing, but it was rare for her to touch me so firmly as of late. She pulled my body toward her, then stared into my eyes from up close.

"Asuta, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you certain?"

"Yup, totally."

"I see." Ai Fa said, releasing my arm. "Very well. Go ahead and do what you need to."

"Sure. Okay, I'm counting on you to stir that pot."

I really was fine. At least as long as Ai Fa was by my side. With that thought holding me up, I started walking.

While it was dark down around my legs, as long as a hole to the depths of hell didn't open up beneath me, I would still be able to feel the sensation of solid dirt under my feet.

It's perfectly normal to get overwhelmed by sentimentality in the middle of a fun festival.

I could still feel Ai Fa's warmth on the spot where she had grabbed my arm. That warmth granted me strength more than anything.

5

With the arrival of the lower sixth hour, the sun god vanished from sight. The festival only got more lively along the street after that.

Some of these folks would undoubtedly be making a commotion all through

the night. Yumi had only just opened her stall for business with the setting of the sun.

“The Great Southern Tree’s already opened their stall to the south of here, and since there aren’t any other giba stalls around there, business is supposedly really thriving.”

“I see. Wouldn’t it have been smart to open your stall there too, Yumi?”

“But the farther south you go, the more the spaces cost. We can earn more than enough here, plus we get a boost from your popularity to boot.”

The Westerly Wind’s okonomiyaki had definitely been selling smoothly. Today, they had prepared a whole one hundred orders. Yumi and her friend Luia seemed quite excited, as no matter how quickly they grilled them, they couldn’t get ahead of the demand.

Also, Myme and Mikel had shown up at our restaurant earlier as customers. Even though they weren’t selling anything, they had still hired Bartha to guard them and see them to and from town by wagon. The post town was just too dangerous at night, so Mikel had accompanied Myme today to determine whether or not it would be possible for her to do business in the evening, even with a guard.

“See? There’s nothing to worry about with Asuta and the others right there. And Bartha will be right by my side on the way to and from,” Myme argued, giving Mikel an imploring look.

It had been some time since Mikel had last come by our stalls. As he stood there and ate his tarapa stew, he had an incredibly complex expression on his face.

“But you get bandits and the like out here at night. There’s no guarantee you wouldn’t be attacked on the way back to the Turan lands from the post town.”

“That’s why I’d have a guard!”

“Then what about after that guard leaves? You could be followed back home, and they could come into your house later and threaten not only your money but your very life.”

Myme's eyebrows drooped as she made a face like a sad puppy.

Bartha patted the girl's head of dark-brown braided hair. "It'll be fine as long as we aren't tailed, right? Despite how I might look, I'm a hunter from Masara. If anyone follows after us on a tolos or in a wagon, there's no way I'd miss it."

"Yes, but..."

"Mikel, you were born in the castle town, right? I can understand your concern, but even here in the post town with all these ruffians around, there's nothing to worry about as long as you know how to handle yourself. I mean, those girls there are running a business all on their own, right? Or are you saying I'm less reliable than they are?" Bartha added with a bright grin across her face that looked more manly than the faces of most men. "Besides, I've already been making sure to stay attentive enough to prevent bandits from following us during the day too. It's only natural to be that cautious when you're pulling in so many coins, right? I swear I won't lead any troublesome folks to the Turan lands, so please show some trust in my skill."

With that, Mikel finally relented, and decided to allow Myme to run a stall on the next holiday.

Today, Bartha had only been hired as a guard for an hour, so after eating their meals, they headed right on back to the Turan lands.

After that, the members of the Gamley Troupe showed up. Just like during the day, they brought their own containers so they could take the food back to their tent. The only ones to show up this time, though, were Pino the acrobat, Shantu the beast tamer, and Neeya the minstrel.

"The nighttime show has already started, so we're the only ones who are free. Sorry that we keep running around here, but we're going to have to go back and forth a bit."

Just as she had said, the three of them ended up making several trips between our stalls and the tent.

Each time they came back, Neeya would say a few pointless words to Ai Fa, but naturally, my clan head's iron will held out against any desire to inflict violence upon a precious customer. However, that didn't mean she was going

to show him any courtesy, instead simply ignoring him while remaining utterly expressionless.

The Gamley Troupe had opened for business with the setting of the sun, and they seemed to be doing quite well. I was constantly seeing folks here and there wandering into the entrance to the tent and the fortuneteller's booth off to the side.

"So you're going to come see us again, mister?"

"Yeah. It looks like we're gonna wrap up work surprisingly early, so there should be nothing stopping us from coming over."

Sundials weren't exactly useful after sunset, but it shouldn't have been any later than six and a half at that point. However, in spite of that, the pot in front of me was running out quickly, and while the other stalls each had a varying amount of food left to sell, we all seemed to have the finish line in sight. Though the number of customers had dropped somewhat, we were still just as short on plates as always, and even our restaurant's temporary expansion remained full.

We had already purchased more tableware to prepare for tonight. In fact, we had bought enough for each of the customers in our eighty-four seats to use three full sets, or two-hundred-and-fifty-two sets in total.

However, during the peak rush, we ended up using all of them, and our seating went over capacity. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say we used them all *because* the seating went over capacity. We always had around 130 people in our seating area, so it was only natural that ended up happening.

The myamuu giba and poitan wraps didn't require plates, so it wasn't like all 130 customers were using three sets, but even so, we couldn't keep things as they were. My guesstimate was that we needed another thirty to forty more sets in order to not make the customers wait around for tableware to be available.

This really is an unbelievable number of customers. Next time around, maybe I should make a push to prepare more curry or pasta.

To prepare for today, we had increased the amount of the soups we prepared by fifty portions and the other three dishes aside from the pasta by twenty, but

even so, it looked like it would all sell out in less than two hours.

The total numbers for the dishes were 350 giba hot pot stew servings, 120 of the tarapa stew, 160 each of the myamuu giba and poitan wraps, and 200 of giba and nanaar carbonara, added up to 990 servings all together.

With each customer ordering three dishes on average, that would work out to 330 customers, which was less than we got during the day. We just ran out too quickly. I had predicted we would be open for business for 140 minutes at the shortest and 200 minutes at longest, so it was completely unexpected to be done in less than two hours.

Since people primarily get food from the inns at night, I thought that we probably wouldn't have to worry about customers showing up at a rate any faster than they do in the daytime. I'll have to rework the plan with everyone from the Ruu clan tomorrow, I thought to myself as the tarapa stew sold out.

Because the pasta took some time to prepare, the stall Toor Deen was in charge of still had a number of customers lined up in front of it. However, she only seemed to have twenty or so servings left.

The giba hot pot stew was the second to sell out, followed by the poitan wraps and the myamuu giba a little while later, and then finally, the pasta followed suit. We had sold everything.

According to my intuition, it hadn't even been an hour since the sun had set, so we really had wrapped up in less than two hours. We all exchanged dumbfounded looks between us.

"We'll have to consult with Reina Ruu about how much more to prepare for the next holiday, won't we?" Sheera Ruu said with a proud smile as she washed some dirty dishes.

6

After we had all finished cleaning up the stalls, we headed to the Gamley Troupe's tent.

The number of our people attending this time around had doubled. Myself, Rimee Ruu, and Ama Min Rutim were the chefs who would be going again after

being part of the first group, and Lala Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and Yun Sudra had asked to come along too.

Jiza Ruu had told us we should continue to have the same number of guards as chefs, so on that side of things, we were bringing six more people: Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Shin Ruu, Dan Rutim, Gazraan Rutim, and Giran Ririn. Every last one of them had made it into the final eight of the Ruu clan's contest of strength, so I could tell Jiza Ruu was being especially cautious for this outing.

Though Rau Lea hadn't been chosen for guard duty, he didn't seem especially upset about it, and was just enjoying a chat with Yamiru Lea. I had figured him to be the type who would be brimming with curiosity about the show, but it seemed he was just fine as long as Yamiru Lea was by his side.

On the other hand, someone like Darmu Ruu would never have had any interest in traveling performers. However, there *was* someone staring sadly at his calm and collected profile: Sheera Ruu, who had just been wearing such a content smile a little while ago. She was quite fond of Darmu Ruu, and had surely wanted to see the show together with him. But since he had failed to make into the top eight at the last two festivals of the hunt, he hadn't been chosen as a guard.

Just as I was thinking that was a bit of a shame, Rimee Ruu suddenly called out, "Jiza! Tara's coming with us too today! So wouldn't it be a good idea to bring along one more hunter?!"

"Leaving six with you should be plenty...but if you want to add one more, then go ahead and do so."

"Thanks! Come on then, Darmu!"

"What?" the second Ruu son questioned doubtfully, turning to face his youngest sister. "Why me? I don't have any interest in acrobatics or the like."

"But we should all be together, right? And the women are all from the Ruu and Rutim, so shouldn't it be the same for the men too?"

"Hmph... It's true that it would be better not to trouble our subordinate clans on your behalf."

And so, it was decided that Darmu Ruu would join us after all.

After that, Jiza Ruu gave out some new orders. “Since you’ll be stepping into such a suspicious place, exercise your greatest caution, Darmu. One man should accompany each of the women.”

In all likelihood, Jiza Ruu was just giving orders as the person in charge here. However, I had no doubt that Rimee Ruu had already thought this far ahead when she spoke, and now she was smiling in a way that said, “I did it!” as she heard her eldest brother’s statement.

At any rate, we ended up splitting into boy/girl pairs. The four that were decided on right from the start were me and Ai Fa, Rimee and Ludo Ruu, Lala and Shin Ruu, and Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim.

“The Ruu clan should stick with the Ruu, right?” Rimee Ruu declared with a mischievous, devilish little smile. It seemed Sheera and Darmu Ruu were also set to be paired up. That would leave the already acquainted Dan Rutim and Tara, and by process of elimination placed Yun Sudra with Giran Ririn.

“I’m Yun Sudra of the Sudra clan. Thank you for looking after me.”

“Ah, think nothing of it. I am the head of the Ririn clan, Giran Ririn,” the hunter replied with a bow.

“My...” Yun Sudra let slip. “You’re not only from one of the clans under the Ruu, but the head of your clan, yes? There’s no need to act so politely toward a woman from a small clan like myself.”

“Is that so? I haven’t had an opportunity to talk to a woman outside of our connected clans in some time, so I was unsure how to act toward you,” Giran Ririn replied with a carefree grin. He was a man in his prime with a medium build, and his mustache and his eyes with their smile lines left quite an impression. Beneath that affable appearance, though, he possessed enough strength to take down even Mida and Ji Maam in contests of strength. It was a lovely sight, seeing him standing there alongside the young Yun Sudra. With their similar gray-brown hair, it made them look as if they were father and daughter or something.

“So, when will that Tara girl be showing up? I didn’t see her at the stall. She’s rather late now, isn’t she?” Dan Rutim asked.

But then, Rimee Ruu leaped into the air and shouted, “She’s here!”

Three familiar figures were approaching through the crowd: Tara and her two older brothers.

“Sorry we’re late! Things just got sort of hectic!”

“My apologies. We’ve got a ton of relatives gathered at our house in order to celebrate.”

We had already heard about this earlier, that the Daleim lands had their own way of celebrating.

“Hmm? Where’s Dora? It’s rare for him not to show up at a time like this,” Dan Rutim said.

“Our father went and drank himself into a stupor. He’s not the strongest drinker to begin with and he started at midday, so it’s really no surprise.”

“How sad! And to think, he said we should have a drinking contest someday!” the former clan head replied with a hearty chuckle, while the two sons smiled back at him in amusement. Dan Rutim and the folks from Dora’s household really seemed to be on the same wavelength at this point.

“All right, please take good care of our younger sister. Um, do you mind if we wait here...?” Dora’s older son asked, to which Jiza Ruu gave a confused tilt of his head.

“I don’t especially mind, but I’d imagine the majority of those you share ties with will be leaving.”

“Still, we’d like to get to know the people who are staying here too.”

After a bit of contemplation, Jiza Ruu gave a slow nod.

“Thank you,” the two sons said together.

“Ah, are you all heading to the tent? It’s not dangerous or anything, but you’d better watch out to make sure the other visitors don’t snatch your coins or anything,” Yumi called out from her stall, now sweaty from the heat of her metal tray. She had started up an hour later than us and the okonomiyaki took a little longer to serve, so she was still open for business.

“Right, we’ll see you later. Sorry that you ended up getting left behind.”

“I told you, don’t worry about it! In fact, we should get even more customers without you guys around!”

Now that the other giba dishes had all run out, The Westerly Wind’s stall had a long winding snake of a line in front of it. As she cooked up the batter on her tray, Yumi shot me a grin reminiscent of one of Ludo Ruu’s.

“All right, how about we get going? We’ll see you later, Jiza Ruu,” I said.

“Indeed. If any sort of incident arises, be certain to follow the instructions of the hunters.”

Jiza Ruu’s group would be remaining behind, waiting in our spaces with the stalls and wagons. Among them, Toor Deen and the Ratsu woman saw us off with smiles.

A moment later, we arrived at the Gamley Troupe’s tent. Even though an hour or so had passed since sunset, there didn’t seem to have been any change in the flow of customers. It wasn’t tremendously crowded, but there were always folks approaching here and there. I saw three young women lined up chatting excitedly in front of the fortune teller’s booth too.

Perhaps because we had closed down a while ago, there were now fewer people along the illuminated street, yet there was still no shortage of passersby holding containers of fruit wine as they went. And in the middle of it all, the guards were still standing in the street looking bored.

“Hmm. It really is quite a suspicious place,” Giran Ririn remarked in an amused tone as he looked up at the huge tent. He was the oldest of the group after Dan Rutim, but his sense of curiosity seemed to be as strong as that of the younger members.

We let Rimee Ruu and Tara take the lead once more as we stepped into the tent.

Inside hung what looked like a lantern with a flame enclosed inside glass, but beyond that, it was as black as night. However, there was a similar light a few meters ahead, so we went ahead and walked in that direction.

There were a number of westerners standing around under that light, paying coins to the people in charge of reception—the little guy, Zan, and the minstrel, Neeya. What an odd pair they were.

“Oh beautiful maiden, at last you have come to meet me!” Neeya joyfully remarked upon noticing Ai Fa. Instantly, my clan head half-closed her eyes.

“Minstrel, at the moment you are the one running a business, while I’m here as a customer.”

“Ah, finally I hear your voice. It’s truly beautiful, like the beating wings of a fuluneya bird.”

“Allow me to state this more clearly... I find you unpleasant. Both for your strangely cloying voice and your frivolous words.”

Neeya stared at her blankly for a moment, then broke out in a captivated smile. “Aah, I simply cannot get enough of those eyes, like a gaaje leopard stalking her prey! Even though it’s my job to make people feel at ease, I myself am feeling some tension here!”

Ultimately, Ai Fa just held her tongue, and I gave an exhausted sigh. I probably hadn’t been forced to deal with someone this flippant since Kamyua Yoshu. “We’re ready to pay the entry fee. Is Pino working right now?”

“Pino? Yes, I’m sure she’s off helping or hindering somebody somewhere around the tent. Her very existence is like a spectacle in and of itself. Take care not to scream if you happen to encounter her in the dark.”

Apparently, this guy’s frivolity ran full force in all directions. But anyway, we added our coins to the woven basket as the small man silently indicated, then he lifted the curtain that led farther in.

Beyond it lay the path through the thicket we had walked the other day. There were lights spaced out at intervals, yet it still remained just as eerie as any forest would be at night. The guests who entered in front of us had already disappeared from view, and I heard a man’s scream coming from the end of the path.

“Ah, is the black ape still there in the same spot? That’s something to look forward to,” Dan Rutim remarked in amusement as he watched over Tara.

We made it all the way to the end of the path without running across either the seven-colored bird or the large turtle. But as soon as we got there, Rimee Ruu excitedly proclaimed, “Ah, it’s Huey and Sara!”

Rather than the black ape, we found the silver lion and the leopard awaiting us on the other side of the woven net. It was no surprise that folks seeing them for the first time would scream. Both of the massive beasts had eyes that shone brightly, even in the dim light of the lanterns. The “oohs” and “aahs” I was hearing from behind me seemed to have come from Giran Ririn and Yun Sudra.

Dan Rutim went, “Hmm...” and stuck his left hand beyond the netting. Instantly, Huey and Sara roared out just as loudly as the black ape had, seriously surprising us.

“What are you doing?! You shouldn’t scare Huey and Sara like that!” Rimee Ruu berated him.

“Ah, sorry. They really are clever creatures.”

Sure enough, the two of them wouldn’t attack anyone without permission from their master. Still, Rimee Ruu certainly wasn’t the only one astounded by how bold and mischievous Dan Rutim was.

After staring in awe at those frightening yet beautiful beasts for a while, we went ahead and continued down the path.

I could hear voices constantly making noise on the other side of the curtains. The majority seemed to be from guests surprised by the performance, but I could also hear the cries of ferocious animals mixed in, and even a strange howl that might have belonged to either a beast or a man; I couldn’t tell. It all built up both our anticipation and unease. However, we didn’t run across any people or creatures on our way to the next space.

We eventually reached the area where the beast tamer, Shantu, had performed. After pulling back the curtain and stepping inside, we found no one there. Just a vase sitting on the ground. It was around fifty centimeters tall and forty wide, with a rounded shape. It had strange patterns engraved into it that might have been in a style from Sym and looped handles on both the left and right. It didn’t have any sort of lid or plug, but I could only see total darkness inside.

We went ahead and spread out around the room, circling the vase at a distance.

“From what I can sense, there seems to be some sort of unusual creature within,” Dan Rutim whispered, the anticipation clear in his voice.

As if in response, the vase began trembling. It gave these short little shakes as if it were a living creature itself. If there really was an animal moving around inside, it had exquisite timing.

However, the thing hiding in the vase was no beast. Ten fingers wriggled up over the brim, causing both Rimee Ruu and Yun Sudra to shriek.

As if enjoying the girls’ reaction, the fingers restlessly stretched out. They were long, slender, bony...and clearly those of a human. Despite how small the vase was, they obviously belonged to a grown man. Something was clearly off here, considering the size of the vase and the fingers coming out of it. And how was a pot with such a wide opening so pitch black inside? Even if we were talking about a child with fingers like those of an adult, there was no way they could compress themselves all the way down to the bottom. After all, much as it was repetitive to bring up again, the vase was only fifty centimeters tall.

As we were all watching in a fluster, the vase tumbled over backward. However, the fingers kept on moving restlessly along the ground, and then the whole vase started darting about the room. It was like something out of a nightmare. Were we dealing with some sort of hermit crab with limbs that looked just like human fingers?

“What is this thing? Are we going to have to shatter the vase?” Darmu Ruu grumbled in a threatening voice, and once again as if in response, the vase suddenly stopped.

Several of the women shrieked again.

The mouth of the vase was now facing straight down, and human arms started growing out of it. In addition to the bony fingers, we could now see the backs of the hands they were attached to, followed by the wrists, and the forearms. A pair of bony limbs were wriggling out of the vase and holding it up.

By the time the elbows had made an appearance, some black object started

dangling down. It was as if the very darkness inside the pot had been dumped out, but it was actually a head with long blackish-brown hair. Following soon after was a long, thin human face. At this point, a man's neck and a pair of arms from the elbow down were extending from the mouth of the upside-down vase. Once again, it was a nightmarish sight. Diagonally behind me, I could hear someone gasp.

Then the pot fell backward once more, and the rest of the man's parts crawled out. The person who appeared from within was clad in a dark robe and was terribly skinny.

With a vacant expression, he slowly rose to his feet. He might have been skinny, but he was also tall. About as tall as Gazraan Rutim. He was the man named Dilo, who had been standing at reception the other day. Even with his dark brown hair hiding half of his face, there was no mistaking his tall and lean figure that made him look kind of like an easterner.

"The Gamley Troupe welcomes you... I am the nighttime guide, Dilo the vase man..."

"What an amazing performance! How did a tall fellow like you manage to contort yourself to fit into such a small vase?!"

However, Dan Rutim's frank question naturally received no response.

Well, I was pretty sure similar tricks existed back in my home country too. By dislocating joints and the like, even a fairly sizable man could fit into a vase of that size. The insides must have looked pitch-black thanks to his hair or clothing. It was no surprise that we could make such a mistake in this darkness.

Still, the man was just far too tall and had an incredibly mysterious aura. If he had told us he used magic from Sym to hide in some sort of subspace, I might have almost believed it.

"The path splits in two from here. The right door takes you to the knight's room and the left to the twins... Which fate will you choose, dear guests?"

"Hmm. 'Knight' is a word for a warrior, isn't it? My interest is more drawn that way, but what about the rest of you?" Dan Rutim asked, seeming like the most excited out of all of us. The knight must have referred to that peculiar armored

man, while the twins were obviously Arun and Amin. Since nobody else offered an opinion on the matter, we ended up following Dan Rutim's preference.

With a relaxed nod from Dilo the vase man, we went ahead and pulled back the next curtain. Once more, we found ourselves faced with a thicket-lined path under the tent.

Just as the curtain closed behind us after we had all gone through, a woman's scream sounded out from the other side. In all likelihood, the next customers had stepped into the room while Dilo was returning to his vase. That would have surely been a nightmarish sight all its own.

"You didn't seem that surprised, Tara. Did you already know about that guy?" Rimee Ruu whispered while we were walking along the dark path.

"Yeah, since he was here last year too. But it's really incredible no matter how many times you see it!" Tara quietly answered.

There wasn't any particular need to keep their voices down, but they must have felt overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the place.

I also heard Shin Ruu ask Lala Ruu, "Are you all right?"

With my vision, I had no confidence I could even make out where all thirteen members of our group were at the moment, so when I looked over and saw Ai Fa's face with her commanding gaze, I started to think that Jiza Ruu's proposal really had been a wise one.

"Hmm? I can sort of sense people quarreling," Ludo Ruu reported as he stood up front, guarding the two youngest of the group alongside Dan Rutim. "But I can't sense any bloodlust. Is it just part of the show?"

Since the word "knight" had been used, did the show involve some sort of display of combat? As we walked forward cautiously, I started to notice the disturbance myself. There was the sound of some sort of solid objects clashing and the tremor of something heavy falling to the ground beyond the darkness.

Then our field of view suddenly opened wide. This time around, it wasn't a room partitioned off within the tent, but an open space in the middle of the thicket.

Right in the center of it, the strongman, Doga, and the armored fellow, Rolo, were fighting. We spread out as much as we could in order to take in the clash.

Doga held a massive club, while Rolo was equipped with a wooden sword. However, the armored guy seemed totally helpless when faced with the strongman who was over two meters tall. He only looked to be around my height, and though his whole body was clad in leather armor, he still had a rather slender profile. Honestly, he almost looked like some sort of wooden doll.

With a stiff motion, Rolo took a swing at Doga. His legs even left the ground, making his attack look extra silly. The uninspiring slash of the wooden sword was easily swept aside by Doga's club. And then, the strongman kicked Rolo hard right in the gut with a huge leg like an elephant's.

The armored knight flew two meters or so through the air and then crumpled to the ground. Yes, "crumpled" was definitely the right way to put it. I couldn't help but be concerned about whether it was really an act.

As we looked on silently, Rolo started clattering and trembling. Then, his slender hips suddenly lifted into the air. It made for quite a comical sight, with just his rear sticking up like that.

Trembling like a newborn deer, he feebly rose. Specifically, his lower half stood up, but his head remained on the ground in an incredibly unnatural pose. Then both his arms rose, and they seemed to pull the rest of his body upright. What a strange sight.

While he was fully standing now, it was as if the core of his body was missing. His limbs were all feebly bent, and his head was lolling to one side. Looking closely, only his right heel was touching the ground, and similarly, only the tip of his left foot was supporting him.

Rolo started rattling and walking over toward Doga. With the way he was moving, it was like all the joints in his body were dislocated and he was being manipulated by strings from overhead. With not even the tiniest bit of his skin showing, he looked just like a marionette.

Ah, maybe it's that sort of act?

With those humorous motions, Rolo sliced at Doga once more, and sure enough, Doga casually swiped the wooden sword aside again. The momentum of the counter seemed to push Rolo backward, and he started to fall over. However, as if someone went and pushed the pause button midway through, Rolo froze in that falling position. One of his legs was in the air as his waist bent diagonally, and his neck dangled loosely. It wouldn't normally be possible to stop in that pose. It was just so unnatural that I couldn't help thinking that he really was a doll being held up by strings.

This is what they call pantomime, isn't it?

After a fair bit of time, Rolo once again stood back up and launched another choppy attack at Doga. However, this time around, Doga's club swept his slender body aside. Rolo flew through the air once more, but rather than crumbling to the ground, he stopped in another unnatural pose. And then, he charged yet again.

As I stole a glance around at everyone, I found Rimee Ruu's and Tara's eyes were sparkling with excitement, the Rutim husband and wife wore relaxed smiles, and Dan Rutim's eyes were wide open. One of Ludo Ruu's eyebrows was raised, Yun Sudra was watching with a look of surprise, and Giran Ririn wore a wide grin. Lala Ruu looked excited as she clung to Shin Ruu's arm, and Shin Ruu himself appeared to be puzzled.

And then, my gaze met Sheera Ruu's and she shot me a gentle smile.

Both my partner and hers were frowning, with looks of such bewilderment and suspicion that they were like wild animals who had come across a space shuttle. They seemed to be questioning how to even interpret what they were seeing.

It was fair to say both Ai Fa and Darmu Ruu were seriously surprised as they intently watched the armored man's performance. If I hadn't had any idea of what pantomime was, I might have felt just as astonished as they were. Those who took it as a comedic show simply enjoyed it, while those who saw it as a bizarre display of physical prowess looked bewildered. That was the overall impression I got.

As I was thinking all that, though, suddenly a beast's roar sounded out.

Half of our group instantly ducked their heads, while the other half placed their hands on the grips of their blades.

A large black figure came down right between Rolo and Doga. It was a giant black-furred beast like a gorilla—the black vamda ape.

The eyes of the creature that had suddenly appeared were blazing deep red, and with its huge hand it grabbed Rolo's head and lifted his body high in the air. Rolo's limbs stiffly flailed about in a truly pathetic display.

The black ape's arms were even more burly than Doga's, and it used them to fling Rolo's body into the air. The knight's body flew so lightly it seemed almost unbelievable, until he slammed into an especially thick tree trunk and fell to the ground.

The black ape placed both fists on the ground and bent its thick neck backward to let out another roar. As soon as its roar ended, an eerie silence fell over the space. At some point, Doga had disappeared from sight. Rolo just sat there unmoving, looking like a pile of junk.

With its red eyes, the black ape glared over at our group. But then, there was a clattering sound from Rolo's armor as his body stirred. The beast vacantly turned his way, and our gazes followed along.

Rolo rose with the same sort of humorously awkward movements as before. With his wooden sword raised, he made an unsteady charge toward the black ape. And when the sword just poked the beast on the head, it was the black ape's turn to collapse to the ground.

With his wooden sword held high, Rolo let out a victory cry in a shrill, mechanical-sounding voice. "Uraaaaaah!" Apparently, it was actually his strange shouting that we had heard from beyond the curtain.

"Thus ends the performance of the knight king Rolo..." Doga stated, his huge figure emerging from the shadow of the trees. In place of his club, he was now holding a woven basket.

At the same time, a whistle sounded out and the black ape got right back up. As it glanced over at Rolo's choppy victory dance out of the corner of its eye, the beast went and casually clambered back up into a tree.

“That was certainly a surprise. It was a wonderful performance, wasn’t it, everyone?” Dan Rutim commented.

At that, we all pulled out our coin bags.

Tara had told us that the general way of doing things was to add a one-fourth coin if you were satisfied, a half coin if you really enjoyed it, and nothing if you didn’t appreciate the act. And so, we all followed those guidelines and tossed our coins into the basket. Since the hunters didn’t carry coins around with them, the women from their houses covered their share.

“My apologies, but could you pay my portion? You can have this tusk until I can repay you,” Giran Ririn asked Yun Sudra, as he didn’t have anyone else from his clan with him.

“The next guests will arrive soon, so please continue on your way. The next space is over in that direction,” Doga pointed, and we got moving.

There was no curtain, but if I looked carefully I could see that there were ropes stretched between the trees in order to create a path. Since there were lanterns hung in various places, there was no risk of getting lost, but it was still quite difficult to tell just where in the tent we were at this point.

“So that was a black ape of Jagar? It truly did look incredibly powerful,” Darmu Ruu said.

Walking next to him, Sheera Ruu replied, “It was really surprising. I thought for sure that it was going to attack us...”

“Don’t be foolish. No matter how much it roared, that beast didn’t give off any bloodlust at all.”

I had to think that he probably could have worded his response a bit more kindly.

However, when Sheera Ruu replied with, “Is that so?” her tone sounded even more lively than usual.

These must have all been entirely novel experiences for the people of the forest’s edge, and it would obviously be even more fun to experience them alongside the person you had feelings for. As I stole a glance over at Ai Fa’s

composed face, I couldn't help but feel that way.

"Oh my. Welcome," a voice suddenly called out from above, and I almost let out a shriek. Looking in the direction it had come from, I found Pino's white face staring at us from the foliage, upside down.

"Y-You scared me there. What are you doing in a place like that?"

"I'm keeping an eye out for any folks causing trouble or looking troubled themselves. Sometimes people even wander off the path," Pino replied, breaking out in a grin while still hanging above us. "If you're coming down this path, you must have chosen that blockheaded knight's performance instead of the twins. Up ahead, you're finally going to get to meet the troupe leader," Pino said before disappearing back into the leaves.

Apparently, the climax was now close at hand. We all continued on through the darkness as a group.

7

As we moved along the path through the thicket, we once again found a leather curtain blocking our way.

The entire interior of the tent should have been a circular space only about twenty meters in diameter, but it felt like we had walked quite a long way by this point. Following such a dark trail really did seem to throw off my sense of both time and distance.

Since we didn't have anyone guiding us, we just went ahead and pulled back the curtain, only to unexpectedly find the thicket continuing on endlessly past that point. However, there were curtains to the left and right stretching out ahead of us, making a path through the thicket around five meters wide. None of the curtains had windows in them, as usual, leaving the path dimly lit by the hanging lanterns placed at long intervals.

"Someone seems to be hiding nearby." Ai Fa quietly stated.

Thanks to all the trees, there were plenty of blind spots. What sort of performance would we be seeing next, and from whom?

Just then, I heard a beast growl, “Grrr...” from overhead. Did they have another animal in addition to the black ape, silver lion, and leopard?

The beast tamer, Shantu, had to have been in the previous location looking after the black ape. But he had previously left the tent for a little while to visit our stalls, so maybe the beasts could still manage to perform a little bit even without the old man around.

While I was considering that possibility, Darmu Ruu uttered a tense, “Hmm...”

From the treetops above, a pair of golden eyes were staring down at us, no less intimidating than those of the black ape and silver lion. The beast’s fur might have been the same color as the darkness, as I still couldn’t make it out.

“What is that thing?” Ludo Ruu asked, his voice tense. The look in Ai Fa’s eyes was more intense than ever before too. Was this ferocious beast even more dangerous than the black ape?

It was then that something truly shocking happened.

The growling beast suddenly started speaking to us.

“The Gamley Troupe...welcomes you...” It was a hoarse, scratchy voice. However, that was undeniably proper human speech. “I am...Zetta... I will guide you to...our leader, Gamley...”

I had heard the name Zetta from Pino. Just like the troupe leader, Gamley, he supposedly spent the day sleeping. However, I just couldn’t sense any human intelligence behind those eyes that flickered like will-o’-the-wisps. And yet, he was still speaking human words.

Maybe he’s a beast who memorized human words, like a parrot? His eyes were just so beastly that I couldn’t help but think so.

Then, out of nowhere, something abruptly changed. Ai Fa suddenly grabbed me by the head and forced me to the ground. In the same instant, I noticed a drawn blade shining in the dark of night. Ai Fa had brandished the knife at her hip.

“Aah!” Yun Sudra shrieked and crouched down beside me. Looking up, I saw Ai Fa facing to the left, back-to-back with Giran Ririn, who had also drawn his

knife.

“Asuta, no matter what happens, don’t lift your head. There are villains about.”

“V-Villains?”

Ai Fa’s eyes had become blue infernos. For the first time in a while, they had the light of a hunter in them.

It was then that I finally noticed a strange object on the ground by my hand. It was the top half of an arrow that had been snapped in half.

“So they’re firing arrows from above, over the curtains? Looks like there’s quite a few of them, and they seem to be approaching us,” I heard Dan Rutim remark with a daring laugh. Though I couldn’t see well from my position, the hunters must have been protecting the women they were paired with.

I looked up in a fluster, but unsurprisingly, I couldn’t spy anything out of place. All I could see above the two-meter-high inner curtains of the tent was complete darkness.

“This is bad. It’s too dangerous here,” Ai Fa said as she grabbed my arm. “Keep moving and keep your head down. Bandits are approaching from behind us as well.”



I didn't exactly have any time to respond. Ai Fa and I moved alongside Yun Sudra in the dark. I had no grasp of what everyone else was doing at all.

Before we had even made it more than a few meters, my arm was pulled to the right. With a disturbing ripping sound, the curtain to our left was torn open and some shadowy figures leaped out.

Ai Fa silently swung her knife, and there was a clanging sound like she had hit something tough, along with a man's voice grunting, "Urgh!" My clan head had repelled a slash coming at her from the side. Even though she only had a knife while the other guy had a huge bastard sword, he was the one to get forced backward. Ai Fa continued to draw away from him, putting her back up against a nearby tree trunk. Since she was still pulling my arm, I did the same.

There looked to be five of those shadowy figures, but since the closest lantern was pretty far away from us, I couldn't properly make out their appearances.

"Asuta," Ai Fa said as she suddenly wrapped her left arm around my body. Her right hand was still brandishing the knife.

"A-Ai Fa, what's...?" I started to ask, only to be cut off by the sound of her knife deflecting something.

The sound of rustling footsteps around us grew quieter. Another arrow had been fired, and Ai Fa had struck it down.

"Don't leave my side. It's taking all I have at the moment to maintain this distance."

Ai Fa was currently still injured. Even as I felt the warmth of her body up against mine, I started to panic.

"Die already!" a hoarse voice shouted out as one of the men slashed at us again with his sword. Before Ai Fa could even react, though, another blade swept in from the side to deflect it. At the same time, our attacker was lifted up into the air and flew in an arc before slamming into the ground. As the bandit let out a groan, the figure who had driven him back stood in front of us.

"What is going on here? I can't recall us doing anything that would make these people want to point their blades at us," Giran Ririn's voice calmly stated.

The other men who had appeared through the ripped curtain crept our way bit by bit with their weapons held at the ready. Then even more new enemies appeared—three men who roughly pulled open the hanging curtain we had passed through.

“Tch, not here either! Hey, where’d that bastard go?!”

The men were all holding torches, so I was finally able to see them clearly. I spotted the original five, plus the three newcomers. Our attackers were wearing shabby cloth attire with leather breastplates and bracers. It looked like they were westerners. All of them were equipped with blades and bows.

“Who are you people?” Darmu Ruu questioned from the direction we were heading toward.

When I looked at him, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Our companions from the forest’s edge were standing there not far from us, and I could see the eyes of the hunters burning brightly in the darkness. Aside from our two pairs, everyone else had formed a circle around the women. I could see Darmu Ruu and Dan Rutim facing our way.

As the bandits looked between our two groups, one of them let out a throaty, “Huh?! That’s what we want to ask! What, are you friends with those performers?”

“Who cares who they are? We need to kill every last person here!” a voice chimed in with repulsive joy as one of the men tossed his torch right into the thicket. The grass on the ground sputtered, and smoke started rising into the air, along with a concerning smell.

“So you intend to point your blades at us no matter what? In that case, we will follow our laws and take your right arms,” Darmu Ruu stated forcefully.

Ai Fa finally let go of me. She pushed off from the tree trunk and faced the bandits with Giran Ririn at her side. Then, from her spot crouched down behind the Ririn clan head, Yun Sudra reached out and clung to me with trembling fingers. I whispered to her, “It’s going to be okay. There’s no way a group of hunters from the forest’s edge would lose against an equal number of enemies. We all just need to take care not to get in their way.”

“R-Right...”

It was then that a beastly roar erupted from overhead.

The mysterious being with the golden eyes had jumped down on top of the bandits from the treetops. The criminals must not have even noticed his presence. I could hear a man shout, “Gyah!” in confusion, and a number of them fell clumsily to the ground.

I stared in amazement. Even seeing him properly, I still couldn’t actually grasp what he was. His whole body was coated in jet-black hair, which kind of reminded me of the black ape. However, he was much smaller than that beast, only looking to be around Ludo Ruu’s size.

Since he had a longer coat than the black ape, I couldn’t make out his figure very well, but he didn’t look to be especially bulky or thin. He just seemed to be built like an average human being. In spite of that, he had bright, fiery golden eyes, visible fangs in his mouth that was hanging wide open, and a roar like thunder.

His first blow sent one of the men flying, and as soon as he landed on the ground, he leaped toward his next prey. His movements were as agile as any beast.

With sharp nails, he dug into two faces, causing another pair of our attackers to collapse to the ground.

A third man swung his blade with a look of terror on his face. Dodging out of the way, the beastman swung his right leg. The guy’s legs were swept out from under him and he tumbled to the ground. Then the beastman swiftly leaped out of the range of his enemies’ blades.

“Y-You damn monster!” one of the men shouted as he let loose an arrow from point-blank range.

The beastman’s right arm casually flicked out, deflecting the arrow so that it embedded itself deep into a tree trunk.

“Dear guests, please run... I will punish these scoundrels...” the beastman, Zetta, growled.

That only seemed to cause the men to panic further.

“Hmm. What a truly surprising appearance! Like one of the rumored savages of Morga, but a bit more human!” Dan Rutim said with a chuckle. “However, it seems there’s some sort of commotion up ahead as well. Should we stop here, or continue onward?”

The beastman, Zetta, was silent, looking bewildered. Another voice answered Dan Rutim’s question in his place. “In that case, go ahead and stay right there! Since you came all this way, I’d like to show you my performance before you leave!”

Both the bandits and I all turned in that direction at once.

The curtain behind me and Ai Fa opened wide, and a new figure stepped forward from inside.

“Really, what a boorish lot! Even nobles aren’t permitted to set foot here in the Gamley Troupe’s tent without paying any coins, you know,” the man said as he strode our way without any hesitation. After passing between us and Darmu Ruu’s group, he faced the bandits.

His appearance was definitely strange. He was a tall man with long curly blackish-brown hair, and wore what looked like a red turban wrapped around his head. He had an unusually prominent aquiline nose, sunken eyes, thin cheeks, and a pointed lower jaw with a long beard like that of a goat. His right eye was a perfectly normal shade of brown, but his left one was hidden under an eye patch.

His tall figure was clothed in a bright-red double-breasted top, below which he wore a black vest and balloon pants. The long coat he also had on was embroidered with golden thread in a complex pattern, and his neck and arm were adorned with a number of showy accessories.

There was just one more point of note about the man: his left arm was missing.

“You... You’re Gamley! Don’t try to tell me you’ve forgotten my face!” one of the men shouted as he stepped forward, brandishing his blade.

The one-eyed, one-armed man, Gamley, turned toward him with a smile.

“Unfortunately, I can’t say that I recognize you. I offered one of my eyes to the fire god, so I can only remember half of what there is to see here in this world.”

“We’re the Blue Beards, and you stole a bunch of valuables from us! We’re getting revenge for our leader, here and now!”

“Can’t say I recognize that name either. But it’s not like I go around memorizing the names of bandit groups anyway,” Gamley replied while stroking his long beard in a way that made it seem like he was looking down on them. In the meantime, we went ahead and joined Darmu Ruu’s group.

The hunters all watched over the proceedings with great attentiveness, Ai Fa foremost among them. If there were bandits waiting ahead as well, then the only option would be to see how things played out here.

With the flames from the torch now beginning to spread across the ground between them, the strange fellow stood facing the bandits.

“And if you say we stole something from you, then you must be some real good-for-nothing bandits. Don’t worry, I assure you we returned it all to its rightful owners. After all, we swore an oath to only ever earn our keep through performing.”

“Bastard!”

“I have to say, you’ve got quite a grandiose name for such a worthless gaggle of bandits. If you actually have any sort of association with the Red Beards, you should really have more dignity than that,” Gamley stated, then pointed down at the blazing torch by his feet. “Also, don’t you know that starting a fire in town is an even more serious crime than murder? I’ve personally built up some debt to the castle and the land of Genos for that sort of thing, so I know there’s no way the guards would overlook such lawlessness.”

“Enough talking! Slaughter them already!”

The bandit who had been speaking held his sword up high and swung it at Gamley. Calmly, the troupe leader held out his right palm toward the man. An instant later, my field of view was dyed deep crimson.

I had no idea what had just happened, but when my vision cleared, I saw that

the man from before had dropped his blade and was screaming in anguish. His face was wrapped in flames, and the unpleasant smell of burning hair was drifting over to us.

“I need to be quite careful while I perform my act, you see. If I make even a small mistake, I could be arrested as an arsonist,” Gamley said, and then he gave an affected bow our way. “Well then, dear guests, please watch carefully as I, the leader of the Gamley Troupe, put on a show for you.”

Gamley’s right arm once again swung through the air, and something unbelievable happened. Fire stretched out like a snake from the torch burning in the middle of the thicket, slithering directly toward the bandits. A fresh round of screams rang out as two of the men were ensnared by the flames.

“Th-This guy’s a monster too!” one of the men shouted out as he pulled back his bow with trembling fingers, only for Gamley to swing his arm a third time. A ball of flame formed in the air, and the unleashed arrow flew off in a random direction.

“Now then, we must pay attention to our feet as well.” Gamley bent down and made a motion with his right hand like he was scratching the ground. The flames raced across the ground as if they were alive, and rushed in to burn the men’s feet.

“How about I make some flaming flowers bloom in the air next?” Once again, Gamley swung his arm. With a pleasant popping sound, red, blue, and green sparks crackled in midair around the now panicking men.

By now, it was like we were watching some poor souls crying out in terror, having been confronted with the flames of hell.

If it wasn’t magic, then it must have been some kind of sleight of hand using inflammable oil or gunpowder. But I didn’t feel like I had any chance of seeing through the trick.

“Well then, let’s move along to the final part of our performance.”

With the roaring flames casting deep shadows on his face, Gamley looked like some sort of devil. His hand suddenly flew up to the patch over his left eye and tore it away, revealing a jewel as red as flame embedded in his eye socket.

“Vairus, god of fire, grant just a single droplet of your blessing upon your faithful child.” Gamley then grabbed the hem of the crimson coat he wore and swung it down in a fanning motion. With far more intensity than the sparks before, whirling flames in three colors wrapped around the men, earning even further screams.

The flames danced about wildly in a stunning display. With each popping sound, a blazing flower of some color or another bloomed and then vanished. Even from our position a fair distance away, we could still feel the oppressive heat. It was a frightening, and yet truly beautiful sight. However, at this rate those men would surely burn to death.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, though, my field of vision suddenly went black. I had completely forgotten about the beastman, Zetta, by this point, but now he was pouring the contents of a large vase he had gotten from somewhere over the men. The stuff gave off a sap-like smell, and was quickly seeping into the dirt. As it coated the ground, the flames that had just been raging so fiercely vanished in an instant, leaving just the sight of the cowering, whimpering bandits.

“Oh, you’ve dealt with things over here too?” Pino’s voice suddenly called out. It had come from the other side of the curtain on the opposite end of the tent from where Ai Fa and I had moved. “I hurried on over, but it looks like I needn’t have bothered. Well, as long as nobody got hurt, that’s what matters most.”

Dan Rutim’s huge figure towered over us from behind, but sure enough, I was able to see Pino there over his shoulder, thanks to the fact that she had shown up riding on the shoulders of a creature even bigger than the former Rutim clan head, the black vanda ape.

The various hunters of the forest’s edge made way while still guarding the women they were paired with, and I saw that the black ape held an utterly defeated man in each of its huge hands.

“We handled all the ones that came our way too. It seems there was someone keeping watch outside of the tent, but old man Shantu managed to deal with him as well.”

“I see. What an uncivilized band,” Gamley muttered before offering us another affected bow. “Well then, that concludes my performance. You have my deepest thanks for coming out tonight.”

Then Gamley slowly lifted his head, showing us the shining gemstone in his left eye socket and a beaming smile.

8

Not long after, there unsurprisingly ended up being quite a crowd outside the tent.

The nearly twenty bandits who had been apprehended were tied up with straw rope and taken away by the guards. Both the performers and the guests inside the tent were being questioned about the details of what had occurred, and there were a number of passersby stopping to watch the proceedings.

Just as Dan Rutim had noted, the bandits had split into groups in order to attack from multiple entry points. However, the troupe members and the beasts had managed to capture them, and shockingly, not even a single guest had been harmed.

The biggest roles had been played by the big guy, Doga; the armored man, Rolo; the black ape; Huey; and Sara. The folks who had been there and saw them fight talked enthusiastically of their exploits, much to the delight of the onlookers.

“A disruption like this on the very first day makes me seriously concerned about how things are going to go from here on out...” Marth muttered, sounding exhausted after having been assigned to question us. “Apparently, the Blue Beards have been amassing allies ever since they developed some kind of a grudge against these performers, and have been trailing after them for some time. They must have intentionally chosen the day of dawn for their revenge in a sad attempt to spread their infamy further. What an annoying bunch...”

“It was a really big commotion... Um, will the Gamley Troupe be allowed to keep doing business after this?” I asked.

“They aren’t at fault here. In fact, they acted to protect the citizens of Genos

and the town while capturing the entirety of a wanted bandit group, so we should be giving them a reward, not tossing them out,” Marth said, sounding quite reluctant and heaving a deep sigh. “Still, to think that you of all people were there in the middle of it...”

“H-Hey, we’re purely victims here too.”

“I’m well aware of that. Regardless, please try to not get into so much trouble in the future.” We were released, but Marth’s group undoubtedly had all sorts of business left to wrap up. That was really unfortunate, considering we were in the middle of the festival. “All right, you’re all free to return to the forest’s edge. Depending on what the bandits have to say, we may have to question you all further.”

“Understood. Okay, we’re heading out now.”

With that, we left the tent, and Pino came running over from where she had been talking to another guard.

“Hold on, you guys! Zetta said you ended up having to defend yourselves with your own blades...” Sounding unusually polite, Pino gave a deep bow. “It was our ineptitude that caused you to suffer such terrible distress. None of you were hurt, though?”

“Right. As you can see, we’re all unharmed.”

“We are truly sorry. If something had happened to one of our guests, we would all feel hesitant about continuing to do business,” Pino said, and then her gaze shifted and fixed on Darmu Ruu. “From what I saw, you seem to be the leader of this group. The troupe leader is still busy with the guards, so allow me to apologize to you on his behalf.”

“You stole goods from those bandits and returned them to their rightful owners... That being the case, there’s nothing to feel ashamed about. And I can’t see any need to apologize when all the bandits who pointed blades at us have been captured.”

“You really mean it? You won’t be worried about visiting our tent in the future?”

“My father and older brother will be the ones to decide that, not me.”

“Then would it be possible to offer our apologies to them as well?”

Darmu Ruu silently jerked his chin and then started walking over to where Jiza Ruu’s group was waiting. Ludo Ruu had already slipped past the guards in order to let them know what had happened.

So Pino and Jiza Ruu are going to talk? That sounds like quite an incredible encounter, I thought to myself as I turned toward Ai Fa. As we walked along, she bowed her head to Giran Ririn.

“You have my deepest thanks for your assistance before. Were it not for that, things may have been somewhat more dangerous for me.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case. After all, you struck down that first arrow quicker than I could react. You really are quite a hunter, being able to move so well with that body,” Giran Ririn replied with the same smile as always. “More importantly, your chest bindings came loose, didn’t they? You should have a woman fix them as soon as possible. If you go inside a totos wagon, you should be able to avoid having anyone see.”

“Right,” Ai Fa replied, casting her gaze downward as Giran Ririn headed over to Darmu Ruu.

“Ai Fa, your bandages came loose? Then, did your broken rib...”

“It’s nothing. If I had needed to move much more, I might have injured myself once again, but Giran Ririn helped prevent that,” Ai Fa replied, her eyes coming back up to shoot me with a glare. “My injuries most certainly haven’t gotten worse, so I’ll still be coming to town with you again tomorrow.”

“Just as long as you’re not hurt. But there’s no need to get so ahead of yourself,” I said, letting slip a strained chuckle and earning a frown from Ai Fa. “That turned into a heck of an ordeal, though. I feel like I’m still seeing spots in my vision.”

“Indeed. Whether it was that beastly being or the man who manipulated flame, we all found each of them to be quite difficult to comprehend... I offer the forest my thanks that they are not our enemies.”

I agreed completely. Still, it felt as if even that whole fiasco was only one small part of the overall festival, as the street was still just as lively and brimming with

excitement as always. Even after getting hit with that unforeseen misfortune, everyone from the forest's edge still seemed to be perfectly calm as they strolled along. The only one who looked like she might cry was Tara, but Rimee Ruu was trying to console her with a smile.

Looking at the state of things, it would surely be no problem for us to keep our business running tomorrow. The sun god's revival festival had only just kicked off, so we couldn't let a little incident like this dishearten us.

"So there are ten days left until this banquet is over?" Ai Fa muttered as she walked. Her frown had vanished from her lips at some point as she looked out over the street, just as I had been doing.

"That's right. The revival festival is just getting started. I'm sure it'll be a lot to handle in all sorts of ways, but I'll be counting on you."

"That goes without saying. And besides..." Ai Fa said, breaking out into a rather childish grin under the dim lighting. "It seems these banquets in town are rather enjoyable. Bandits acting lawlessly aside, that is."

"Yeah." I nodded back with a smile of my own as we walked toward a rather angry-looking Jiza Ruu.

And so, though there was a rather significant misadventure on the way there, we were finally able to close the curtain on the first day of the sun god's revival festival.

Intermezzo: The Deen Clan

Toor Deen was feeling rather nervous as she waited for the Deen men to get back from hunting giba. She was currently in the main Deen house's kitchen, and evening was fast approaching. It was still too early to start preparing dinner, though, so the young chef was in the midst of giving cooking lessons to the women of the Deen clan.

"Was the show those traveling performers put on really as amazing as it sounds?" an older woman from one of the branch houses asked in the middle of the class.

As she wiped the fat off her meat carving knife, Toor Deen nodded to the woman. "Y-Yes. Actually, I'd have to say it was more scary than amazing... I mean, she stood up on top of that thin pole and played a flute. It was too frightening for me to watch."

"What's so scary about that? There's nothing scary about standing on a thin pole, is there?"

"Well, the pole was incredibly tall. It was more than twice as high as the roof of a house here at the forest's edge..."

"Wow. That *is* quite a performance, then!" the older woman said, her eyes opening wide.

One of the younger women who had just finished wiping down her workstation leaned in, her expression brimming with curiosity. "So they really do have shows like that in town? I've never had a chance to see them myself, since we've always tried to avoid town at this time of year."

"That we have. The sun god's revival festival, yes? I was always told that since there are a lot of outsiders around, going there would be nothing but trouble."

"And now, you and the others handle all the shopping after you finish doing business, so there's no need to head into the post town. I feel a little jealous of you, Toor Deen, when I hear about how you get to see stuff like that..."

“Huh? Ah, I-I’m sorry...” Toor Deen said with a flustered bow.

“What are you saying?” the older woman asked with a chuckle. “I can’t think of anything you would have to apologize for. After all, you’re heading into the post town for work, and we all know how busy you are every single day.”

“That’s right. You’re even using the little bit of free time you have today to help us out... Oh, uh, sorry for saying I was jealous of you. My bad.”

Both of the women were smiling softly, clearly showing how they were actually concerned for Toor Deen. The simple fact that they cared so much was deeply moving for the young chef.

It had been over five months at this point since Toor Deen had become a member of the Deen clan. In that time, her new clan members had come to treat her as a true equal, like they would any of their comrades.

I have to try even harder, to repay the kindness everyone has shown me...

As that thought was passing through Toor Deen’s mind, the younger woman poked her on the cheek.

“What’s with that brooding look on your face, Toor Deen? Only us members of the Deen clan are around, so don’t be so on edge.”

Toor Deen’s face went red as she shrank down even further.

It was just then that a commotion could be heard approaching from outside. The men had returned from the forest.

“My, they’re back rather early today. We don’t have anything urgent to take care of right now, so how about we go greet them?”

And so, Toor Deen’s group headed out front and found four men approaching. They were the men of the main Deen house: the clan head, his two sons, and Toor Deen’s father. The two sons were carrying a giba tied to a grigee pole together, and the elder son’s eyes widened when he spotted them. “Oh? You have quite a group here today. Was Toor giving you a lesson?”

“Yes. Toor made it back earlier than usual today, so we asked her to teach us before we set about working on dinner,” the elder son’s wife answered with a reserved smile. They were an innocent young couple who had only just gotten

married recently.

“I see. Well, it wouldn’t be fair for us to be the only ones who get to enjoy delicious food. I feel bad for imposing on you so much, Toor, but it’s important for the women of the branch houses to learn all that you have to teach them, so we’re counting on you.”

“R-Right. I’m still quite inexperienced myself, but I’d like to give my all for everyone in the clan,” Toor Deen replied, causing the elder brother to break out in a grin.

“As earnest as always, Toor. That spirit of yours makes you highly reliable, but take care not to strain yourself too hard.”

With that, the brothers went off to go handle the giba.

Their father, the clan head, was currently talking with his wife. The other women had returned to the kitchen, so Toor Deen called out to her father, “Welcome home. I’m glad that you made it back safely again today.”

Her rather untalkative father just nodded back. “Yes.” Rather than trying to say anything further, he looked down upon his daughter with a gentle gaze. Then, his brow suddenly furrowed. “Is something the matter, Toor? Your eyes are all red, as if you’ve been crying.”

“Ah, no, that’s not it. You see, Asuta...” she started to say, only for the clan head who had been chatting with his wife to call out.

“Toor, you seem to have something to discuss with me. Is there some sort of issue with the work you do for the Fa clan?”

Instantly, Toor Deen shrunk back. The head of the main Deen house had an incredibly strict personality and an intense face that hardly ever showed a smile. This was someone Toor Deen had a tremendous amount of reverence for. While his eldest son was pretty big-hearted by nature, the young man seemed to have gotten that from his mother.

“R-Right. There was something I wanted to discuss, yes... I was planning to bring it up over dinner, though...”

“Is it anything complicated? If so, then that’s all the more reason to tell me

now,” the clan head replied, wrinkles forming around his brows as he approached Toor Deen. He wasn’t trying to intimidate the young chef, but his face just packed such a punch that it tended to have that effect.

Not that long ago, he had scolded her once while wearing a face like that. She had mixed poitan together with sugar and egg to make a sweet dish, and he had been terribly harsh when he told her not to waste precious ingredients like that.

Thanks to Asuta, the matter had been resolved, but it had been a really big deal from her point of view. She and her father had previously been members of the Suun clan, so they needed to work harder than anyone to live proper lives as people of the forest’s edge. Since the Deen clan head was the one who had taken in the burdensome pair, they had to be even more certain not to do anything displeasing in front of him.

“So, what is it you wanted to discuss?” the Deen clan head asked, looking down at Toor Deen from up close.

Though the young chef felt like her heart was going to up and wither away, she calmed herself and worked up the courage to reply. “You see...on the twenty-first of the violet month, Asuta and some of the others are scheduled to travel to the Daleim lands. And, well...I was asked to accompany them.”

The Deen clan head scrunched up his face more and more doubtfully. “You have gone to the Daleim lands before, haven’t you? Are you saying that wasn’t sufficient?”

“That’s right. Before, we simply observed how the farms grew vegetables... This time, the plan is to eat dinner alongside the people there in order to deepen our bonds, and then spend the night in their home.”

“Spend the night in the same home? So you’re asking to sleep away from the forest’s edge yet again?” Just last month, Toor Deen had accompanied Asuta to Dabagg. The Deen clan head had looked rather reluctant about the whole thing back then too. “And you said the twenty-first of the violet month? If I recall correctly, aren’t you scheduled to work in the post town not only during the day but at night as well on the following day?”

“Yes. During the day, we’ll be serving whole roast giba, and at night we’ll run the stalls. The post town and Daleim lands aren’t that far apart, so that’s why

Asuta chose the day before for the outing.”

The Deen clan head still wore an intense look on his rugged face as he held his tongue.

Toor Deen strove to calm her heart, which was pounding from anxiety, earnestly continuing, “It seems we’ll have an opportunity to taste the cooking of the Daleim lands on that day. Asuta thinks it will be useful both for understanding how the people there live, and also to improve my skills as a chef. It seems that a great many of those who live there still have an aversion to us people of the forest’s edge, so maybe we’ll be able to help correct that somewhat, and...”

At that, the Deen clan head raised his hand to cut the young girl off.

“You’ll be accompanied by hunters acting as guards, won’t you?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, of course. Not just Ai Fa, but also several hunters from under the Ruu... I believe it should be roughly the same number overall as when we went to Dabagg.”

“Hmm. I suppose there’s no way one of the leaders of our people, Donda Ruu, would be careless enough to expose the women under his clan to danger,” the man remarked, then he shot Toor Deen a glare. “So...you wish to accompany Asuta as well?”

“Y-Yes, of course!”

“Then why did you cry so much that your eyes turned red?” Toor Deen hadn’t expected him to point that out, so she was left at a loss for words. Her own father was one thing, but even among the women she worked with, not many had noticed. “There are a great many chefs who follow Asuta, aren’t there? You’re still young, so there’s no need to strain yourself to go along with them.”

“N-No, that’s not it! This is, well... I was just so happy that Asuta would show such favor to someone as inexperienced as me, and the tears just started coming out.”

“Oh? So you’re saying you were so overjoyed that you couldn’t help but cry?”

With a blush, Toor Deen replied, “Yes.”

The man looked astounded and tilted his head. “It seems my fears were completely unfounded. In that case, do as you please.”

“Huh? Th-Then, do you mean I have your permission to go to the Daleim lands?”

“You yourself wish for it too, don’t you? Then I can’t see any reason to refuse,” he answered, and then his face scrunched up again. “Still, you’re only ten years old. Don’t push yourself too hard and break down, all right? Our parent clan, the Zaza, told you to observe the Fa clan’s actions, so it wouldn’t do to have to give up midway through.”

“R-Right. I understand that much.”

“Then that is enough. I’ll hear the rest at dinner,” the man said, turning around to head to the house. Partway there, though, he turned to send a sidelong glance back at Toor Deen. “There is one more thing I forgot to say... Though you are still young, you shouldn’t cry so easily. You don’t want to make your father worry more than he needs to.”

Leaving those words behind, the clan head finally went on his way. His wife had been standing off to the side silently the whole time, but now she let a giggle slip out and turned toward Toor Deen. “The clan head is concerned for you as well, Toor. Be sure not to overwork yourself, for him too.”

“Right... Understood.”

The clan head’s wife gave a single nod before disappearing back into the kitchen.

Now Toor Deen and her father were the only ones left there. He patted her head with his large hand. “You were just told not to cry so easily, weren’t you? It’s not just me. Lots of people in our clan will worry if you do,” he said, his voice gentle and calm.

That just brought Toor Deen’s tears on even quicker, though. Earlier in the day, she had cried a whole lot and made Asuta feel troubled, but she just couldn’t hold them back.

Mother forest... I’m truly grateful from the depths of my heart that you guided me here to the Deen clan...

Toor Deen lifted her head, and through her teary vision she could see her father smiling kindly. She wasn't able to stop her tears, but the young chef put all of the emotions she was feeling into the smile gave him back.

Group Performance: In the Far North

1

A number of toto-pulled wagons were advancing along a rugged mountain path, which was coated in pure white snow. They were currently passing through the bottom of a ravine in the Tarless mountain range. The trail they were on was just barely passable by wagon, and on either side of it were black cliff faces dotted here and there with snow.

Much of the tremendous abundance of the Western Kingdom of Selva was owed to this rugged mountain range, which shielded Selva from the worst of the ice and snow that came down from the north. The mountains themselves were a part of the territory of the Northern Kingdom of Mahyudra, and they cut straight across the map. To the north of them was Mahyudra, and to the south was Selva.

The journey to reach this point from Aboof, the northernmost fortress city in Selva, took just two days, which meant it wasn't rare at all for Mahyudra and Selva to fight each other in the area. That was the dangerous region that Shumiral Zi Sadumtino's Silver Vase was currently racing to get through.

There were ten members in total in the merchant group, and they were driving five large, boxy wagons, each pulled by two toto, with two merchants to each wagon. It would soon be four and a half months since they left their homeland of Sym. In their wagons, they carried all sorts of goods from their home nation, as well as a variety of merchandise that they had purchased later on.

It had been roughly a month and a half since they had left the town of Genos, which was a vital center of trade in the western kingdom, and it was now the fourteenth of the ashen month. If you were to travel directly toward the Tarless mountains from Genos, it would only take around a month or so, but along the way they had stopped for several days to do business in places like Aboof and

Behett.

Of course, the most important trading destination for the Silver Vase was Selva's capital, Algrad. The second was Genos, naturally. They generally stuck around for a whole month to do business in those two locations. Anywhere else, they would only stay for a few days, but coming to Mahyudra like this was also an essential part of their business.

The nations of Mahyudra and Selva had been enemies since long ago. The only things exchanged between them were blades filled with hostility, and they most certainly never did business with one another. The only thing tying them together was the people of the Eastern Kingdom of Sym, with whom they were both friendly.

"Shumiral. The sun, has descended," his comrade holding the reins of the head wagon called out from the driver's seat. Since knowledge of the western tongue was a big boon for the Silver Vase, they took care to avoid speaking the language of their homeland as much as possible, even in their everyday lives. "The path, is dark. Will we, be able, to arrive, at our destination, today?"

As he talked, his breath came out white. The climate was cold around Aboof, but it was like another world entirely here in the Tarless mountains. Shumiral and his companions were even wearing fur under their leather cloaks in order to stave off the cold.

Shumiral poked his face out of the wagon next to the driver's seat, and as he felt the cold wind blowing fiercely on his cheeks, he took a quick glance around.

"It won't be, an issue. We'll soon arrive, at the settlement, of Munapos."

"The mountains all look, the same. But you, can tell?"

"I can. I've traveled this way, many times now."

Shumiral had traveled this path many times since he was a child, when he had come with his father. They would go from their homeland of Sym to Genos, then on to Aboof, followed by Munapos, and then the capital of Selva, Algrad... Shumiral's father had established this trade route over the course of many years.

After roughly a year, they would return home, where they would remain for

half a year. He had been living this way for over ten years now.

However, in another four months or so, he would find out whether or not there would be a significant change to that way of life.

What is Vina Ruu doing right now? Shumiral thought to himself as the wagon swayed along the mountain trail.

Before they had departed from Genos, Shumiral had confessed his love to Vina Ruu, a woman of the forest's edge.

He had also said he wanted her to think about her response as he spent half a year traveling the continent. During that time, he would pave the way toward becoming a hunter of the forest's edge. That was what Shumiral had said to her when leaving Genos.

Is Vina Ruu living a happy and healthy life even now? I hope that no unforeseen misfortune has befallen her... Shumiral thought, right before the wagon shook in a strange way.

At first he thought a wheel had gone over a rock or something, but instead it seemed that the tolos had stumbled.

"Shumiral, what was, that?" his comrade asked from the driver's seat, his voice a bit lacking in restraint. As he was even younger than Shumiral, he was easily shaken.

With a silent nod, Shumiral slipped past the driver's seat and jumped directly onto one of the tolos. He kicked up the metal bit affixed to the leather belt around the large bird's torso, setting it loose from the wagon. It seemed Shumiral's comrade had managed to safely bring the wagon to a stop before the remaining tolos hurt its legs.

At any rate, Shumiral rode the tolos forward in order to investigate.

Now free of its load, the bird rushed down the mountain trail far quicker than before. Upon sensing the weight of a human on its back, any fear it was feeling had vanished, because after all, this tolos had been Shumiral's traveling companion for a long time.

So that's it?

The tolos had stumbled because of something that had descended down the cliff face to their right.

It was a massive dark-gray figure, about twice the size of an average human... A muffur bear. The huge beast charged them, sending the white snow flying into the air. Its five-clawed paws alone were surely bigger than Shumiral's head.

With a deep, growling roar, the muffur bear came leaping toward them. Despite its massive frame, it was shockingly agile. However, a tolos would still come out on top in terms of agility. As Shumiral manipulated its reins, the giant bird's head leaned left.



The massive bear's claws just barely grazed Shumiral's cloak. The merchant and his mount plunged ahead to the left, coming up to the cliff wall in just three steps.

Since tolos couldn't see too well in the dark, Shumiral used the reins to guide it and gave it a kick on the left side of its torso. With that, the tolos eagerly pushed off the wall with its left leg, and leaped into the air like a bird taking flight.

The muffur bear was not far behind them, hot on their trail, until Shumiral hit the tolos's right side with his foot, and the bird swung its right leg down through the air, landing a kick right on the bear's face. Its talons must have dug into at least one of the beast's eyes. After all, the huge bear was now stumbling backward and wailing in pain.

Shumiral and the tolos landed on the ground, facing toward their assailant.

With dark-red blood gushing from its face, the muffur bear started to raise both its arms over its head. However, it suddenly froze mid-movement. Letting out a breath of air that made a white cloud, the huge bear suddenly fell over backward onto the ground.

On the other side, Shumiral could see another of his comrades riding a tolos.

"Shumiral, are you, all right?"

"Yes."

The figure atop the tolos was quite tall. It was the second in command of the group, Radajid Gi Nafassiar. In his hand, he held one of the blowguns from Sym that he specialized in using.

"This is, a problem. If we don't, move the bear, our wagons, can't pass through," Radajid stated while properly suppressing his emotions.

As someone who had also spent many years in the Silver Vase, a mere muffur bear would never be enough to shake him. However, he didn't seem to have sensed what Shumiral had.

"No worries. They will carry, the muffur bear," Shumiral stated.

As Radajid returned the blowgun to his breast pocket, he glanced around the

area. Soon, a number of figures sized similarly to the muffur bear came sliding down the cliff face.

“Why, if it isn’t our guests from the east! It seems the prey we let slip away from us caused you all some trouble!” a voice called out in the northern tongue, echoing throughout the mountains. It had come from one of several particularly large fellows from Mahyudra, who looked practically like muffur bears themselves.

The five men walked over to Shumiral. Their hair was golden, their eyes were purple, and their skin was like tanned leather, red from snow-burn. Though easterners tended to be taller on average than westerners, northerners were even taller still, and had highly muscular builds to boot. Since they had on clothing made from muffur bear pelts, from a distance, they could almost be mistaken for the beasts.

“Yeah, these guys are definitely easterners. But we have to follow the law, so could you start by providing proof?”

“Of course,” Shumiral replied in the northern tongue as he brought his fingers together. “I, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino, swear here and now, that I am a child, of the eastern god, Sym.”

Westerners weren’t permitted to set foot in northern territory. However, if someone had mixed blood from the east and west, it could be difficult to determine their background from their appearance, so it was always necessary to prove you were an easterner when here in the north. That meant that if Shumiral were to marry into the forest’s edge and become a child of the western god Selva, he would never be able to do business here in the north ever again.

“Hmm. You managed to take it down with just the two of you? That’s quite a feat, but that poison you used won’t make it inedible, will it?”

“It will not. Banagiuz poison, disappears, when heated,” Radajid replied, using the northern tongue as well. Since the Silver Vase primarily did business in the western kingdom, only the three longest-serving members of the group could speak the northern tongue. The other seven members only knew enough to swear to their god.

“Ah, so you’re the Silver Vase? That’s good to hear. The chief will be real happy to see you. I’m sure you brought along all sorts of interesting goods again, right?”

“Yes. I hope they’ll be, to your liking.”

As Shumiral was talking with that one man, the other four hurriedly slit the huge bear’s throat and began bloodletting it. The people of Mahyudra often ate the meat of those man-eating muffur bears. Since westerners avoided eating carnivorous beasts, that might have been part of the reason they saw northerners as “barbarians.”

“All right, we’ll guide you from here to Munapos. Welcome, merchants from the east,” the man said, his face like tanned leather breaking out in a broad grin.

And so, Shumiral’s group was welcomed as guests of Munapos.



The settlement of Munapos was located just half an hour from where they had met up.

It had been roughly half a day now since they had entered the Tarless mountains. This was one of the closest settlements to Selva in all of Mahyudra territory. Still, the only way to reach the settlement was through the ravine they had just traversed. There was nowhere to hide along the path, and man-eating bears frequently appeared in the area, so Selva hadn’t invaded along that route in decades.

The settlement itself was a small one, with only around 150 people living there. But since they served as lookouts keeping watch for incursions by the forces of Selva, it was an important location for Mahyudra despite its size. Supposedly, whenever its population decreased, the capital ordered people to move there from other settlements.

Even if the last several decades had been peaceful, before that, the area had been on the front lines of the war. Back then, it had been Mahyudra that was trying to descend the mountains and invade western territory, which led to the establishment of the fortress city of Aboof. Ever since then, Mahyudra had

moved the focus of their invasion elsewhere. From that point on, Munapos had found a new purpose as a point of contact for commerce with the eastern kingdom.

The chief of the settlement was the head of a bloodline that had lived there for as long as anyone could remember, a man in his prime by the name of Uraya Fal.

“Thank you for coming, guests from the east. If I recall correctly, your name is Shumiral, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Shumiral Zi Sadumtino.”

Shumiral had visited this settlement every year and a half. Over the last ten years of following that cycle, Uraya Fal had always been the chief of the settlement.

He looked to be just over forty, and like the majority of northerners, he was a large man with golden hair, purple eyes, and a reddish face. He was even taller than Shumiral, and easily twice as wide. His attire was made from a dark gray pelt, and he wore fang and claw accessories around his neck and arms. All of the men of Mahyudra living in the Tarless mountains worked as hunters.

“You can make yourselves at home here for the night. Are you planning to head out as soon as morning arrives?”

“Yes. We have business, to take care of.”

People who did their business primarily in Mahyudra would continue all the way north to the nation’s capital, but that wasn’t the case for the Silver Vase. For them, the chief of Munapos, Uraya Fal, was their one and only business partner in the land.

“You lot don’t show up very often, but when you do, you always bring along more interesting and unusual goods than any other merchant group does. Obviously, that includes food from the west, but then on top of that there were the blades and glass jars you sold us last time. They got a lot of praise in the capital.”

“I’m honored. Even we, have heard tell, of the handiwork, of Mahyudra,” Shumiral stated, adjusting his posture. “And I am glad, to hear you say, our

blades earned, a fine reception. After all, this time, we have an excess, of them.”

“Ooh, that’s unusual. You merchants from Sym treat your iron as quite precious.”

“Yes. A promise, to purchase, the blades, was broken.”

The business agreement they had with the noble Cyclaeus in Genos had been unilaterally broken off by the other side. As he thought back on the matter, Shumiral wondered to himself whether or not the people of the forest’s edge had settled things with the man by now. That thought shook him a bit once again, though he didn’t let it show.

“Hmph, that’s what I’ve always told you... Those westerners aren’t worthy of your trust. They’re all frail and crafty, real good-for-nothing folks,” Uraya Fal said with a displeased snort as he gulped down some wine that had been poured into a glass cup. That cup had been purchased from the Silver Vase, but the wine must have been some kind of spirits made here in Mahyudra. “All right, why don’t you go ahead and show us your goods before dinner?”

“Yes, very well.”

With that, Shumiral gave the members of his group a look, and they started carrying over the luggage that had been set down by the room’s entrance.

They were currently in Uraya Fal’s house. The inner walls were lined with layers of pelts to keep out the cold, and there was a bright flame burning in the fireplace. The light from the fire also served to illuminate the numerous goods.

They included cups and vases made with glass from Sym, clay plates, beautifully adorned wooden bows and blowguns, hatchets with black stone blades, bundles of woven fabrics, accessories made of silver and precious stones, chitt seeds and various herbs...and a full thirty cooking knives.

Additionally, they also had the various goods they had purchased from around the western kingdom.

Karon and kimyuus leatherwork, giba and gaaje pelt rugs, casks of mamaria fruit wine, mamaria vinegar, fuwano flour in bags, karon dried milk, dried aria, and even karon, kimyuus, and giba jerky. The majority of the goods were

ingredients from Genos, which had an abundance of such items. All told, it was enough merchandise to fill two of their five wagons. The settlement of Munapos always made a purchase of around this size.

“Ah, right. Your group never brings gyama meat or dried milk.”

“Correct. Munapos, is far, so foodstuffs like those, would spoil.”

The Silver Vase’s route started by passing to the south of Mount Morga and visiting the town of Genos. That meant it took several months for them to arrive at Munapos, so they sold off all the gyama jerky and dried milk they brought along from their home country along the way.

“I’m real fond of gyama dried milk myself. And the fermented milk too. The stuff made with karon milk just isn’t the same.”

“Do you not, want any, karon dried milk?”

“Oh, we still do. Even if it’s not my favorite, we’ve got some folks in the capital who are eagerly waiting for it. There are always eccentrics out there.”

“I see. This time, we also brought, giba jerky. Do you have, any interest?”

“Giba jerky? They’re the beasts these pelts come from, right? They’re softer than muffur pelts, which makes them a hit with the women, but this is the first I’ve heard anything about their meat.”

“Yes. It is, very delicious, so we bought some. The price, is the same, as karon jerky.”

After Shumiral looked his way, Radajid pulled out a knife and sliced off a sliver of giba jerky, then placed it on a wooden plate and held it out toward Uraya Fal. The chief didn’t show any hesitation at all, popping the slice of meat into his large mouth, and then his already big eyes shot open even wider.

“This is delicious! It’s just as good as fatty bear meat, and doesn’t have any sort of stench about it.”

“Yes. It was, reportedly made, using chest and back meat. I believe, the price will rise, in the future.”

It was nonsensical that such delicious jerky was priced the same as the stuff made with karon leg meat. In the future, giba meat would surely end up costing

as much as karon torso meat. As a merchant, Shumiral was confident that that was how things would play out.

“Yes, I can’t imagine the folks from the capital having any issues with this stuff. I’m thinking I’ll probably buy a lump of it for myself. But as for the knives, we may not have enough here to pay for that many.”

With a hearty clap of Uraya Fal’s hands, the men waiting off to the side of the room began lining up a wide variety of goods in front of Shumiral’s group.

They included the expected casks of spirits, ground powder from a yellow berry called a meles, a blue fruit known as an amantha, rare herbs that could only be harvested in Mahyudra, smoked fish that came solely from the icy sea to the north, little fish pickled in salt, white salt made by purifying seawater, iron axes meant for hunting, and the sorts of stone and fang necklaces the women made.

The majority of it must have been delivered from the capital for trade. It was enough to fill the Silver Vase’s empty wagons back up to full.

“We also have a very small number of silver coins from the capital. This feels like it’s just a bit short, but what do you say?”

Shumiral went ahead and checked the contents of the cloth bag Uraya Fal had handed him. Then he calculated the worth of the goods in front of him and swiftly responded, “Yes, it does indeed seem short, though just, by a little. We could, reduce the number, of knives, to ten, or otherwise, reduce the amount, of the other goods.”

“I see. That sounds fair to me too,” Uraya Fal replied with a hearty nod, but then his eyebrows drooped a bit. “Still, blades from Sym are valuable, so it’s a shame to just let them slip away. We can prepare as many bear pelts and as much meat as you could want here, but still...”

“No. Since it is warm, in the western kingdom, pelts don’t usually, sell much. And since, we will be traveling, around that warm land, jerky can, spoil easily.”

Bear meat had a stench to it, and westerners would never eat meat from a carnivorous beast to begin with. If they headed straight back to Sym after this, then they would be able to sell it, but it was still over half a year before the

Silver Vase would be returning to their homeland. If the jerky wasn't high-quality stuff, it would surely go bad along the way.

"It's so annoying, how those weaklings from the western kingdom don't have the guts to eat bear meat! I hate to have to give up on the goods you brought from the west, but I guess there's no helping it."

"Yes. We merchants all, have our own businesses, to be mindful of."

The merchant groups that primarily did business up north could sell gyama meat and dried milk, and had the opportunity to purchase bear meat and pelts in return. Those who focused on the west couldn't do that, but they were able to bring the bounty of the west to Mahyudra instead. Both routes were equally good.

"Well then, we'll buy everything you've got except for twenty of the knives. My apologies that we weren't able to live up to your expectations."

"No. Having more, blades left, works fine for us."

They would surely be able to sell the knives in the capital of Selva. After all, delicious meals and the ingredients needed to prepare them were valued just as highly in Algrad as they were in Genos.

"All right, then let's put this all away and get started on dinner! Tonight, we feast!" Uraya Fal loudly declared.

This would be the first time in a year and a half that Shumiral's group had attended a feast in Mahyudra. For Shumiral himself, it would surely be his last.

Though he didn't let any emotion show on his face, Shumiral gave a small sigh as he thought of his beloved in that far-off land.

2

Once both sides had put all of their merchandise away, all sorts of dishes were laid out for a feast.

A soup dish boiling in a pot, meles-battered smoked fish, herb-grilled bear meat, small fermented fish pickled in salt, boiled eggs from some unfamiliar animal, a blue boiled amantha dish giving off a sweet aroma... They even had

little pitch-black eggs pickled in salt presented alongside the fresh meat of a vicious beast called an ocean lion this time.

“We just got some goods in from the capital the other day. The ocean lion meat is freshly melted from the ice it came in, so I’m sure even you from the east can eat it without hurting your stomachs.”

The icy northern sea was located roughly half a month from the Tarless mountains, and it was possible for Munapos to import the seafood caught there while sending bear meat and pelts to the capital of Mahyudra.

Even though he had visited the settlement of Munapos many times, Shumiral had only seen this dish with the ocean lion meat and black eggs a handful of times.

“Now then, go ahead and dig in! Eat as much as you please! To the friendship between Mahyudra and Sym!”

“To the friendship between Mahyudra and Sym,” Shumiral’s group repeated in a toast, then gave a prayer to their god in the tongue of their homeland.

The spirits they were drinking were produced from northern wheat capable of withstanding the cold weather of Mahyudra. It was so strongly alcoholic that it felt like it was burning your throat, but for a group that had partaken in alcohol from all over the continent, the powerful drink felt quite pleasant.

There were ten members of the Silver Vase present in the hall, as well as a similar number of hunters from the north. Additionally, five women were moving around to distribute the food and spirits, contributing to the lively atmosphere.

On top of that, the northern hunters smiled a lot and ate plenty too. Even though the Silver Vase’s members were as quiet as one would expect of easterners, each hunter was as rowdy as three men, so a feast with them would always be a raucous affair.

Fortunately, Shumiral was fond of such loud and cheerful events. If he hadn’t been, he surely never would have chosen to live the life of a traveler. His comrades were undoubtedly enjoying themselves too.

Easterners considered it an embarrassment to carelessly let their emotions

show. They were only permitted to shed tears after they had lost a member of their family. Even when they were dining among their own kind with no outsiders, nobody was ever all that talkative. Those were the customs of the east, the way the people of Sym lived their lives.

Their culture was precious to them, and nothing could replace it. Doubtless, only those who nonetheless felt that living that way wasn't sufficient for them by itself would ever consider leaving their homeland, as Shumiral and his group did.

"This soup uses muffur intestines. Please, try some..." a young woman with a somewhat feeble look in her eyes said as she set a plate down in front of Shumiral, then knelt diagonally behind him.

"Thank you, Tion Fal."

The girl's purple eyes shot open wide when she heard his response. "You remembered the name of one such as myself, Sir Shumiral?"

"Yes. I have visited, the settlement, of Munapos, many times, after all."

Tion Fal was, as far as Shumiral could recall, the youngest daughter of the chief of Munapos, Uraya Fal. Since she was especially slender for a northerner, she had left a strong impression on him. She was still as tall as you would expect from a citizen of Mahyudra, so she had a build that seemed somewhat similar to that of an easterner.

In comparison to their jovial, outspoken men, many women of the north tended to be calm and quiet. That being the case, you could say it made Tion Fal even more like a citizen of the east.

"Please, have some while it's still warm."

"Indeed. Thank you," Shumiral replied with a nod, picking up the plate. The cloudy white broth was filled with chunks of bear intestines and herbs. Perhaps because muffur bears ate not only fruit and roots but also meat, all cuts of the beasts had a powerful stench to them. As such, these organs had been boiled with herbs and spirits.

The heat boiled off the alcohol, but there was still a strong aroma of the spirits about the dish. As Shumiral took a slurp of the soup, the taste of the

herbs caused his tongue to tingle. Still, easterners tended to use far more herbs than northerners, so it was no problem for him. The nourishment from the bear offal blended into the soup and joined with the sweetness from the spirits, causing Shumiral to feel as if his body was being warmed from the inside.

“It is, quite delicious,” Shumiral stated, causing Tion Fal to give him a faint smile.

However, for some reason she still hadn’t moved from that spot. Her seat was beside her father, so she couldn’t begin eating without returning there.

“Shumiral, this is, my first time, eating ocean lion, meat,” a young member of the Silver Vase called out in the western tongue from his other side. Turning to look at him, Shumiral found the youth holding a plate with deep-red ocean lion meat on top of it.

“Ocean lion, is delicious. I am, quite fond of it.”

“I see,” the youth answered, his eyes narrowing with a look of relief as he used a wooden skewer to bring the meat up to his mouth.

It was a slice of raw meat, around half of the size of a human hand. While it was large, it was also thin, so the youth was able to fit the whole thing in his mouth. Then, after chewing it several times, he suddenly froze in place.

“Ocean lion, has a strong stench of blood, so you need, this herb,” Shumiral said, pointing to a small jar that had been placed beside the plate. The herb in question had a strong flavor like myamuu, and had been finely minced and mixed together with a light-brown fish sauce. It was absolutely essential when eating raw ocean lion meat.

With a terribly calm look in his eye, the youth stared at Shumiral.

“Shumiral, that was, cruel.”

“It is, an important experience, to have. I was shocked, when I first ate it, myself.”

The youth continued chewing on the meat, looking all the while like he was just barely holding back his emotions. His mouth was surely filled with the taste of blood.

Then, Tion Fal remarked in surprise, “My... I never expected you to play a prank such as that, Sir Shumiral. I feel sorry for that young man...”

She couldn’t understand the western tongue, but it seemed she had still picked up on Shumiral’s intentions, so he gave her a nod.

“Yes. A mischievous, urge, crept up on me. I apologize.”

“My... How childish...” Tion Fal said, bringing her hands up to her mouth and giggling. Secretly, Shumiral couldn’t help but feel something when he saw her do that.

“Tion, we’re gonna run out of booze soon! Could you go get some fresh stuff out of storage?!” Uraya Fal loudly ordered.

Tion Fal’s smile vanished as she replied, “Of course...” and exited the room.

With that, the chief himself smiled and called out to Shumiral, “Well, what do you think? Are you enjoying our feast, dear guest from the east?”

“Yes. We are all, greatly enjoying, the festivities.”

“Oh yeah? You lot never let it show on your faces, so I can’t help but worry a bit.”

“We’re truly, having a good time. The food, is all, delicious.”

That was how he truly felt.

Both the meat and the fish—it was all delicious. While the meal felt a bit lacking in vegetables, there was no helping that, considering the nature of Mahyudra. Just like the east and the west, the north had its own way of doing things.

Even with little in the way of vegetables, it still felt like an extravagant feast when you had this much meat and fish to go around. And since they could get as much salt as they needed from the sea, they didn’t hold back in putting it to use. It really was a luxurious meal, fitting for a place like Munapos, which had a firmly established trade route tying it to the northern capital.

They don’t have many vegetables, so they must make up for it with the nutrition from the herbs and meles.

Meles produced yellow berries that became sweeter when boiled, but in the north they would be ground into meal and used to prepare a dough, like with fuwano. Since it was a cereal grain that grew well even in cold lands, they could devote all their wheat to making spirits instead.

The meles-battered smoked fish had a rich flavor and pleasant texture to it. Apparently, it was a staple dish in parts of Mahyudra located near the ocean.

The bear meat, meanwhile, had been cooked with plenty of herbs. It was tough enough to tire out your jaw and had a unique flavor that the herbs couldn't quite cover up. However, as easterners familiar with the stench of gyama raised in the mountains, they had no reason to take issue with it.

The little fish pickled in salt had an even more unusual flavor to them. After having their little bones and innards removed, the fish were pickled in salt and allowed to ferment, then soaked in an oil that seemed to come from some sort of subspecies of reten and allowed to ferment further.

They were incredibly salty and flavorful, and the fish seemed to nearly melt on your tongue. They were a commodity that the Silver Vase traded in, but only a small number of western citizens with peculiar tastes would ever seek them out. Still, as easterners tended to love chitt-pickles, they certainly had no issues with the taste. A pickled dish made solely of fish certainly was striking and unusual.

There weren't any issues at all with the taste of the eggs, which had been boiled until they were pure white. Since they couldn't be preserved effectively and thus didn't work well as merchandise, Shumiral didn't know any details about them, but they must have come from some sort of bird that lived along the seashore. They were around the same size as kimyuus eggs and had a plain flavor. The northerners were all adding fish sauce before eating them.

Amantha was a sweet and sour fruit reminiscent of arow. Shumiral had to think that adding Jagar-made sugar or honey to an amantha spread served on meles bread would make for a fine sweet.

The glossy little black eggs pickled in salt felt like they were not only terribly salty, but also brimming with nutrition as well. The northerners were eating hearty spoonfuls of them straight, but Shumiral preferred to eat them on meles

bread as well.

Then there was the raw ocean lion meat. When eaten with the fish sauce and herbs, it made for quite the delicacy. It was red meat with a rough texture to it, and not even a hint of fat. If you grilled it, it would surely turn out even chewier than the bear meat. Since easterners didn't eat raw meat in general, it made for quite the curiosity.

All of them were delicious dishes, and intriguing ones as well.

Shumiral couldn't help but wonder to himself what Asuta would make if he was presented with these ingredients.

A number of the ingredients we purchase will likely make it back to Genos rather than selling out in Selva's capital. Would it be possible to sell them to Asuta rather than the castle town?

In the past, one of the nobles of Genos, Cyclaeus, would always purchase any unusual ingredients for the asking price. In fact, Cyclaeus had come to value the Silver Vase highly, as they were one of the few merchant groups that dealt in ingredients from Mahyudra. But personally, Shumiral didn't want to deal with such a neglectful business partner any further, especially now that the noble had such an uneasy relationship with the people of the forest's edge.

It is not something I can decide on my own, but Cyclaeus revoked his promise to purchase those knives from us. I should discuss the matter with Radajid and the others, Shumiral thought to himself as the food atop the plates steadily vanished.

After a while, when Uraya Fal's red face had grown even ruddier, he jovially called out to Shumiral, "Drinking after striking a good deal really is the best! It's a shame that it's gonna be over a year till the next time you stop by, though!"

Shumiral put down the plate he was holding and turned to their host.

"Chief Uraya Fal of Munapos. We have, something that, we must tell you."

"Ooh, what's got you acting so formal? Well, not that I imagine there are many casual easterners in the world!" he said with a hearty chuckle.

As a business partner, Uraya Fal was earnest and didn't hide anything.

Shumiral had come to trust the man and was fond of him on a personal level as well. As such, though he felt his next words needed to be said, it still pained him to do so.

“Today shall be, the final time, that we visit, the settlement, of Munapos.”

At that, Uraya Fal’s eyes shot open wide. “What did you just say? You’ve been getting more and more fluent in the northern tongue each time I’ve seen you, and I can’t remember any issues coming up with our business dealings.”

“This will be, the final day, that the Silver Vase, does business, in Mahyudra.”

The wine cup fell from Uraya Fal’s hand, and the small amount of spirits left inside spilled out onto the rug. “Wh-What do you mean? Did we do something to displease you?”

“No, we are not, displeased. But soon, I may marry, into the western kingdom.”

A commotion started spreading all throughout the room, accompanied by a swelling restlessness. Meanwhile, Tion Fal’s face had gone completely pale as she sat there beside her father.

“Westerners, are not permitted, to set foot, in northern territory. I will be, the only one, changing gods, but even, a single westerner, in the group, is enough, to prevent us, from being able, to do business, in Mahyudra.”

“That’s insane! Why would you even consider marrying a westerner?! Are you seriously planning on abandoning both your homeland and your god?!”

“Yes. I am sorry, but my feelings, are that strong.”

“But if you were to retire from the group...” Uraya Fal started to say, but then he held his tongue.

The second in command of the group, Radajid, went ahead and replied to his thought that had been cut off.

“Shumiral is, one of us. If he, casts aside Sym, it will, be sad, but we, could never, abandon him. As there, will be, various inconveniences, to face, I intend, to take over, as head, of the group, but Shumiral, will remain, a member, of the Silver Vase.”

“I get it. You’ve known one another since your father was in charge, right? My father used to do business with yours, Shumiral. Many merchants from the east visit here at Munapos, but no other group has been so good to us for so long as the Silver Vase,” Uraya Fal replied, biting his lip and looking full of regret.

“Munapos has lost its military value since my grandfather’s era. The Fal house no longer has any chance to distinguish itself through combat, so instead, hunting and the trades we can make with our catches are our field of battle. In that sense, you have been trusted comrades in arms, and worthy opponents as well.”

“It is, an honor, to hear that.”

“It would be a terrible shame to lose you. Won’t you please keep doing business with us instead of marrying that westerner?” It was a truly direct request, fitting for a northerner. On the field of battle, clashing with blades, there was no opponent more frightening than a citizen of Mahyudra. However, as business partners, Shumiral felt the same way Uraya Fal did, quite strongly.

Furthermore, Shumiral’s father had beaten this path. Abandoning it hurt Shumiral as much as it would to have the tip of a blade pressed up against his chest.

“I am, truly sorry. However, I am unable, to alter, my feelings,” Shumiral replied, tension gathering in his brow. In all likelihood, his efforts to hide his emotions were failing. Even so, he placed both fists down on the stiff fur rug he was sitting on and stared back at Uraya Fal’s regret-filled face. “It pains me, to end, our business relationship, that has continued, for so long. I am truly, truly sorry, to you, Uraya Fal, and to, the people, of Munapos, and Mahyudra. It makes me, quite sad, to sever, our connection. But I cannot, change how, I feel.”

“I see...” Uraya Fal muttered with a disappointed shrug. “I understand your feelings on the matter. And this doesn’t change the fact that, at least for today, you’re still important guests. Please, enjoy this banquet all the way till the end.”

“Thank you...” Shumiral replied, deeply bowing his head to Uraya Fal.

“Uraya Fal, seemed disappointed, but I am glad, we didn’t earn, his anger,” Radajid said after dinner in the bedroom that had been assigned to Shumiral.

As he stared at the roaring flames in the fireplace, Shumiral shook his head.

“Though Uraya Fal has a, fiery temper, he doesn’t, get angry, without reason. That just, makes things, all the more, painful...”

Northerners tended to be a wild lot, so much so that westerners feared them as barbarians. But even if the people as a whole had a ferocious spirit, it wasn’t as if they were all unreasonable brigands. Openly letting one’s emotions and desires come across so directly could prove to be a strength just as easily as a weakness, and it was nothing more than an idiosyncrasy in the end.

Shumiral tended to think that the citizens of Mahyudra and Jagar were fairly similar to one another. Southerners were rich in emotions and would quickly raise their voices. They were very far removed from the values held as virtues in Sym, and the people of the east and south would often cross blades at the border. But even when it came to the people of Jagar, Shumiral held no hatred.

Of course, the fact that he had been born on the peaceful plains far removed from the border helped with that. He couldn’t bring himself to hate southerners just because of some war that didn’t even impact him or his way of life.

Why did Sym and Jagar—and Selva and Mahyudra for that matter—need to keep on feuding endlessly? Did the kingdoms really need to steal land from their neighbors so badly? Even if it was a battle to obtain greater wealth, couldn’t it still be fought without taking up arms?

Normally, Shumiral kept such thoughts hidden, simmering deep inside, but now more than ever, he was feeling them quite keenly.

“Shumiral, I think, that...” Radajid started. But when Shumiral turned his way, he furrowed his brow a bit and switched to a different language. “I don’t feel like I can express what I’m trying to say properly in the western tongue. May I speak in the language of our homeland, just for now?”

“I don’t mind, Radajid,” Shumiral replied in the Sym tongue as well, at which point Radajid gave a big nod.

“I know full well that your feelings won’t budge at this point, Shumiral. But

allow me to ask just one more time. Has that woman truly bewitched you that thoroughly? Enough to make you upend the trade route laid out by your great father, the former head of the Silver Vase?”

“Yes. Even I can’t do anything to change it. I feel bad for all of you, to the point that it feels like my body will split in two from the pain.”

“I can tell that much just by looking. If that weren’t the case, I wouldn’t have wanted you to remain in the Silver Vase so badly. But since I never had a proper conversation with that woman of the forest’s edge, I can’t say I understand this. Just what about her commands such great value in your eyes?”

“Is it really possible to put such a thing into words?”

“I do not know. But that woman is a citizen of another nation, and to us easterners, well, how should I put it...?”

“You mean to say her appearance isn’t all that attractive. That she has too much meat on her bones. That’s what you’re getting at, right?”

“Yes. I’m sorry if I hurt you by doing so.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. It’s true, excess flesh isn’t looked upon fondly in the east, especially on the plains.” Unable to hold it back any longer, Shumiral started to smile. “Radajid, I was charmed not by Vina Ruu’s appearance, but by what is in her heart.”

“I see. That certainly makes sense...”

“And that’s not all. I’ve come to find her appearance beautiful as well.”

That statement shocked Radajid all the more.

With a smile still on his lips, Shumiral continued, “The way I see it, one’s appearance can be greatly influenced by what lies beyond it. Facial features and body fat, those are secondary. What matters most is her expressions, the shine in her eyes, the way she laughs, that sound of her voice... I was charmed by Vina Ruu before I even knew what she was like inside, and I eventually found her appearance beautiful as well.”

“But you don’t even know whether or not that woman will take you for a husband. And the people of the forest’s edge don’t have any history of marrying

outside of their tribe, do they?" Seeing this as a crucial moment, Radajid leaned in closer to Shumiral. "Your request to marry her may well be turned down in the end. That would mean the Silver Vase could continue to do business in Mahyudra as we always have. Why didn't you tell Uraya Fal that?"

"Well...because I didn't want to consider such a future, and I can't see myself giving up on the idea without her rather harshly rejecting me."

"So you'll keep asking, even if she turns you down?"

"I pray every night to the eastern god that she won't."

"If your request is granted, you'll become a child of the western god instead, so will the eastern god actually listen?" Radajid sighed while looking upward. "Still, I understand how strong your resolve is. My apologies for bringing the same matter up again and again."

"Please don't apologize. I'm the one who should be doing that."

"No, there's no need for you to be sorry, Shumiral... Still, as I recall, westerners have a saying that even in Sym there is no herb that can cure a lovestruck heart. After all, even someone like you who prided himself on being a calm and composed merchant had his heart completely stolen by a girl."

"Radajid, that's a little embarrassing."

"Stop being so wet behind the ears. You really should have started showing interest in women at a younger age, Shumiral."

Radajid was three years older than Shumiral and had a wife and three children back in Sym. Half of the members of the Silver Vase were married like he was. Even Shumiral's father had taken a wife at a young age, leading to his birth. The thought of family waiting back in the home country made them stronger. Shumiral wanted to marry the woman he loved as well. It was just that he had happened to fall for a woman from another nation instead.

After a moment of silence, there came a knock from outside the door. Tion Fal's voice called out from the other side. "Sir Shumiral, have you already gone to sleep?"

"No, I am up. Please, come in," Shumiral replied in the northern tongue, and

the door slowly opened. As Tion Fal entered the room with downcast eyes, she noticed Radajid and stood up straight.

“M-My apologies. Were you in the middle of something important?”

“Yes. We were, talking a bit, about the future. What is it, that you needed?”

Tion Fal looked rather troubled as she held her tongue.

Seeing that, Radajid stood up from the pelt rug.

“Our talk, was finished. I shall, return to, my room.”

“A-Ah, no, you needn’t do that on account of someone like me...”

“Tomorrow, will be, an early day, so it’s best, to get to sleep. Excuse me, Shumiral.”

“Very well. Until tomorrow.”

Radajid slipped past Tion Fal and exited the room. Though a private room had been allotted to Shumiral as the head of the group, the other members of the Silver Vase were divided up into rooms of three each.

Shumiral remained seated on the rug as he looked up at Tion Fal once more.

“Please, have a seat. What business, do you have, with me?”

“No, well, I...” Tion Fal started twisting and turning a bit and looking pained before sinking down to the floor almost as if collapsing. “Sir Shumiral...are you truly going to marry into the family of a woman from the west?”

“Yes. That is, the request, I have made.”

“But... But why? Changing gods and marrying into another country isn’t easy...”

“Yes. When a relationship, is formed, between citizens, of different kingdoms, oftentimes, the man returns, to his homeland, entrusting their child, to the woman.”

As a result, even if a child was born with mixed blood, they didn’t face persecution so long as the two nations were friendly. People with blood from both Sym and Selva or Mahyudra, or Selva and Jagar... They most certainly existed, even if they weren’t great in number.

Still, Mahyudra and Jagar were located so far away from each other, with Selva spread out between them, that there wasn't really any traffic between them. Even so, there were those in Mahyudra with mixed blood from Sym, and those in Jagar with mixed blood from Selva.

"But I, am asking to marry, a woman of the forest's edge. The people of the forest's edge, do not allow, such interactions, before marriage. And so, I have, no choice, but to marry, into their people."

"Then what if the woman married into your family instead, Sir Shumiral?"

"She is, the daughter, of one of, the leaders, of the forest's edge. Her father, would not, allow her, to abandon, the forest's edge."

Besides, the people of the forest's edge treated the forest as their mother rather than worshiping any god. Even if they changed the god they followed, a member of their people could surely never cast aside the forest itself. That was undoubtedly true of Vina Ruu as well. If she did so, she would surely cease to be Vina Ruu.

"So you spend longer traveling than you do at home... What a wonderful way of life..." Vina Ruu had said back on the day when they had parted. "I've envied people who live that way, and admired the outside world. But ultimately...I'm still a woman of the forest's edge."

Though Vina Ruu's expression hadn't budged, she had surely spoken those words from the heart.

She had admired the world outside of the forest's edge. The settlement she knew hadn't been enough to fulfill her, leaving her with a keen hunger for more. However, she had made up her mind to accept her fate as a woman of the forest's edge.

Perhaps it was that part of Vina Ruu that had attracted him to her. Even if she felt gloomy about her present self, her circumstances, and her way of life, and even if she lamented her own powerlessness to do anything about it, she hid those feelings away and strove her hardest to live brightly and cheerfully. That admirable determination and the precarious balance she struck between strength and weakness might have been the reasons Shumiral found her so charming.

He strongly felt that it was fine for her to remain just as she was. There was no need for her to change anything or cast aside her current self. Vina Ruu was perfectly lovely just the way she was. That was something Shumiral wanted her to know. That there was a man here and now who would accept her. And if Vina Ruu still couldn't rid herself of that yearning for the outside world, well, he could help out at least a little on that front. As long as the laws of the forest's edge permitted it, she could travel throughout the western and eastern territories.

Shumiral lacked the strength to hunt giba. After all, it seemed like it would be difficult to ride a tolos around freely deep in the forest where those beasts lurked. However, he did have the strength needed to ensure someone's safety on the road. As long as he had a tolos by his side, he would never allow any bandits or wild beasts to come close. If he had enough space for a tolos to run around in, he could even take down a vicious muffur bear.

He was also knowledgeable when it came to poisons, a skill that caused people from other kingdoms to fear easterners as sorcerers and shamans. He even knew how to use star reading to determine the proper path to follow. It was difficult for merchants from the west and south to travel without hiring bodyguards, but easterners could make do just with their own abilities.

Shumiral had the strength to protect Vina Ruu, and he would do so even if it cost him his own life. If it was actually possible for them to travel together, and he got the chance to show her the plains where he was born...that would be truly wonderful.

"Sir Shumiral..." Tion Fal said, bringing Shumiral back to his senses.

But then, he was instantly taken aback. Tion Fal had started sobbing like a child right in front of him.

"You really do love that woman, don't you, Sir Shumiral?"

"Yes, I do," Shumiral said with a nod, not understanding what was going on in the slightest.

"Then after tomorrow morning, I'll never be able to see you again... And when I think about that, my heart breaks..."

“But why?”

Tion Fal shook her head.

“I can’t quite say...that it was because I loved you, Sir Shumiral. After all, I lack the resolve to cast aside my own family and homeland... And I couldn’t ask you to marry into our house either... But still, I thought you were the most wonderful person I knew because of how you were able to travel the whole world over so freely...”

“I see.”

“Even if you cut off trade with Munapos, you’ll still be able to keep traveling around the east and the west wherever you want... The thought that I’ll no longer be able to see you as you go about your life as free as a bird, it makes me terribly sad...”

Truthfully, a great many other merchants visited Munapos on a regular basis. There were even other groups who traveled around the nation of Selva and brought western goods to this northern land. Besides, Shumiral was just the leader of his group. There was no reason to treat him any differently from Radajid or any of the others, as they would no longer be able to visit Munapos either. However, Shumiral didn’t feel like bringing up such quibbles. If Tion Fal had explicitly singled him out, then the situation was what it was, and it made the bitter pain in Shumiral’s chest grow even stronger.

“My apologies... I know it was pointless for me to say all that... Please, just get some rest...” Tion Fal said before listlessly rising and turning her back on Shumiral.

However, Shumiral spoke again, directing his words at her slender back. “No. You have nothing, to apologize for, Tion Fal. I...” he started to say, but he couldn’t continue on any further. After all, he didn’t know how to express what he was feeling in the northern tongue.

Undoubtedly, Tion Fal had similar feelings for him as he did for Vina Ruu. But Shumiral couldn’t return her feelings. He had already offered Vina Ruu his heart. If his beloved did not accept it, eventually he might try to marry this girl from the north, and if her father wouldn’t permit that, then he could leave her a child...but at this point, such a thing simply wasn’t possible.

Shumiral wasn't capable of expressing such complex emotions with his shoddy grasp of the northern tongue.

"Please excuse me... And if you would, just forget everything I said tonight..."

With that, Tion Fal vanished beyond the door.

Shumiral ended up spending his final night in this northern land with a terribly bitter feeling in his heart.

4

The following day arrived. The Silver Vase would depart from the settlement of Munapos at the break of dawn, just as they had planned. Though the light outside was still dim, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. It seemed they would have clear weather for the day, but even so, the chilly winds of the north were whistling all around Shumiral and his comrades as they hurriedly prepared to head out.

That meant attaching the totes that had been sleeping in a pen to the wagons and making sure all the luggage was properly squared away. Several northerners watched over the proceedings, stifling yawns all the while. None of them were making any sort of comment about the Silver Vase being traitors or whatever else for having unilaterally cut off their many years of business together. They all just looked disappointed, and maybe a little sad. Since northerners weren't the best at expressing themselves otherwise, the emotions they were showing on their faces were surely the whole of what they were feeling.

Obviously, if they were to run across one another at some point after Shumiral changed gods to Selva, they would swing their blades without any hesitation. After all, northerners were both decisive and rather ferocious. But for now, Shumiral remained an easterner and the head of a group they had done business with for decades, and so not a single person here in Munapos directed any ill will his way.

"Hey, hold on! Are you planning on leaving without even saying farewell to the chief, dear guests?!" Uraya Fal called out, exiting the house just about when

they were ready to depart. Standing behind his huge frame were his family, including the now red-eyed Tion Fal.

Shumiral turned their way and gave a bow.

“Naturally, we had intended, to wait. Uraya Fal, thank you so much, for everything.”

“Right. That’s just what I wanted to tell you. Like I said last night, your group has been distinguished trading partners for Munapos.”

Breathing out a white cloud, Uraya Fal moved forward to stand right in front of Shumiral. He was even taller than Radajid, and had a burly build like that of a bear. There was an extraordinary shine in his purple eyes as he stared down at the easterner.

“Well then, there’s one last thing I wanted to tell you. Do you mind listening, Shumiral, head of the Silver Vase...and leader-to-be Radajid as well?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“I’d like to keep on doing business with you as we have up till now. That’s my position as Uraya Fal, the chief of Munapos.”

Radajid narrowed his eyes ever so slightly, showing his doubt.

Meanwhile, Uraya Fal haughtily crossed his arms.

“What do, you mean? We will, no longer, be able, to keep, doing business, in Mahyudra.”

“The only one who will lose the ability to do that is the head of the group, Shumiral, right? You’re not all planning to change gods over to Selva, are you? If that were the case, I’d have to take back what I just said.”

“Shumiral is, the only one, getting married. But Shumiral, will continue, to be, a member of, the Silver Vase. And westerners, cannot do business, in Mahyudra, correct?”

“Yeah. Once you become a citizen of Selva, you’ll never again be able to set foot in Mahyudra. But just because one of its members is a westerner, that doesn’t mean the Silver Vase itself will be turned away. After all, we’re already doing business with westerners indirectly through you,” Uraya Fal replied,

puffing up his wide chest that was wrapped up in a pelt. “Next time you come this way, Shumiral could remain behind in Aboof, since it’s closest, and wait for you to return. We’d be glad to keep welcoming the Silver Vase as we always have.”

“But will, the king of Mahyudra, permit that?”

“As if something this trivial would ever make it all the way to the ears of those arrogant jerks in the capital! And even if it does, it’d be my responsibility as the one in charge here!” Uraya Fal answered with a brazen grin. “Even if one of your lot becomes a westerner, it’s not like you’re going to start sneaking poison into the food you deliver us or anything, right? I mean, it’s not like we sneak any into the stuff you sell to the westerners! So it shouldn’t be any issue at all!”

“I am, terribly grateful, to hear, your proposal. We also, consider you all, to be precious business partners,” Radajid said, slowly bowing his head.

“If both sides feel the same way about it, then this is definitely the right way to go,” Uraya Fal said, and then his gaze turned Shumiral’s way. “That’s that, then. This’ll be the last time I see you, but I’ll be praying for your good health right up until the moment you change gods over to Selva, Shumiral.”

“Thank you. Even after, I change gods, I’ll never forget, the kindness, that you showed me.”

“Aw, you can forget all that! Once you become a citizen of Selva, we’ll be sworn enemies, unable to stand under the same sky,” Uraya Fal said with a hearty chuckle, only for Shumiral to give an even deeper bow than Radajid.

And then, Shumiral turned his gaze toward the man’s daughter.

“Tion Fal. Last night, you asked me, to forget, what you said, but that is not, so simple to do.”

“Huh?”

She had been staring at Shumiral and him alone the whole time.

“Today is, the last day, I will set foot, on Mahyudra’s soil. However, the settlement of Munapos, Uraya Fal, and you, Tion Fal... I will never, forget, your words, or the emotions, you shared,” Shumiral said as he gazed into those teary

purple eyes.

He had spent a restless night carefully considering how to express what he felt as accurately as possible.

With the hope that his sentiments were getting across properly, he continued, “I am, who I am now, because of, the people, I have met, and the thoughts, and feelings, they shared, and brought about, in me. I am, who I am, because I met, all of you. Even if, I change gods, and we can, never meet again, that fact, will not change. You are all, precious to me.”

“Sir Shumiral...”

“The people, of the north, will become, my enemies. I do not, mind if, you hate me. The laws of, the four great kingdoms, cannot be changed. But I, will never, forget you all. Please, remember that, if nothing else.”

Tion Fal was unable to hold back her tears at this point. And yet, she also wore a vibrant smile on her face. “I will never forget you my whole life long either, Sir Shumiral... Please, always remember in some corner of your mind that a foolish woman such as myself lives here in this northern land...”

Uraya Fal snorted. However, his affection for his daughter was shining in his eyes. It was possible that he had figured out how Tion Fal felt a long time ago.

“It’s not like I could forget an oddball like you so easily anyway. Never show your face in front of me again, Shumiral... Then I won’t have to sully my blade with your blood.”

“Yes. Farewell, Uraya Fal, Tion Fal, and everyone, from Munapos.”

The people of Munapos had been watching their conversation in silence, but now they all started loudly shouting out their farewells. With their raucous send-off washing over him, Shumiral moved to join his companions in the wagons. But just before he could do so, Tion Fal came running over to him.

“Sir Shumiral, I wish you happiness in your marriage...and I’ll search for a husband of my own here in this land.”

“Yes. I hope, that you, find happiness, as well.”

With that, the Silver Vase departed from Munapos.

For Shumiral, it would be the final time he ever set foot in this frozen land.

Farewell, Mahyudra. This land has given me so very much...

He would lose all ties with the north, leave his homeland, and cast aside his god in order to be with his beloved. That was the path he had chosen. He would return to Genos with the strength he needed to become Vina Ruu's husband. With his heart full of thoughts and feelings like that, Shumiral departed the northern lands alongside his comrades.

There were just over four months left till that promised day would arrive.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the twentieth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

At last, this series has reached twenty whole volumes. It's all thanks to the support you've given me, and I'm so grateful to all of you.

With this volume, the sun god's revival festival kicks off, giving us a reason to have some cover art that really seems to celebrate the milestone we've reached. I'm so moved by the perfect, beautiful illustration that Kochimo managed to provide for the occasion.

As for the contents, the Group Performance this time around is "In the Far North," starring Shumiral.

I've mentioned this many times in the afterwords at this point, but I've written thirteen of these Group Performance stories. That's quite a lot, so I've been putting them out one or two at a time for the last several volumes.

Since Shumiral left Genos all the way back in volume nine, he's been on a break for more than ten volumes now. I feel so sorry for him. But because it's been so long, although "In the Far North" takes place roughly a month after the conclusion of the Cyclopeus arc, a lot more time has passed in the main story. We've seen the ashen, black, indigo, and violet months, and now there are just two more to go until he's scheduled to return.

Of course, I suspect it'll still take several more volumes for those two months to actually pass, so I hope everyone will keep eagerly looking forward to his return until then. And naturally, I hope that you'll enjoy this bonus story showing what his life is like when he's away from Genos as well.

Let me finish by thanking everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

February 2020,

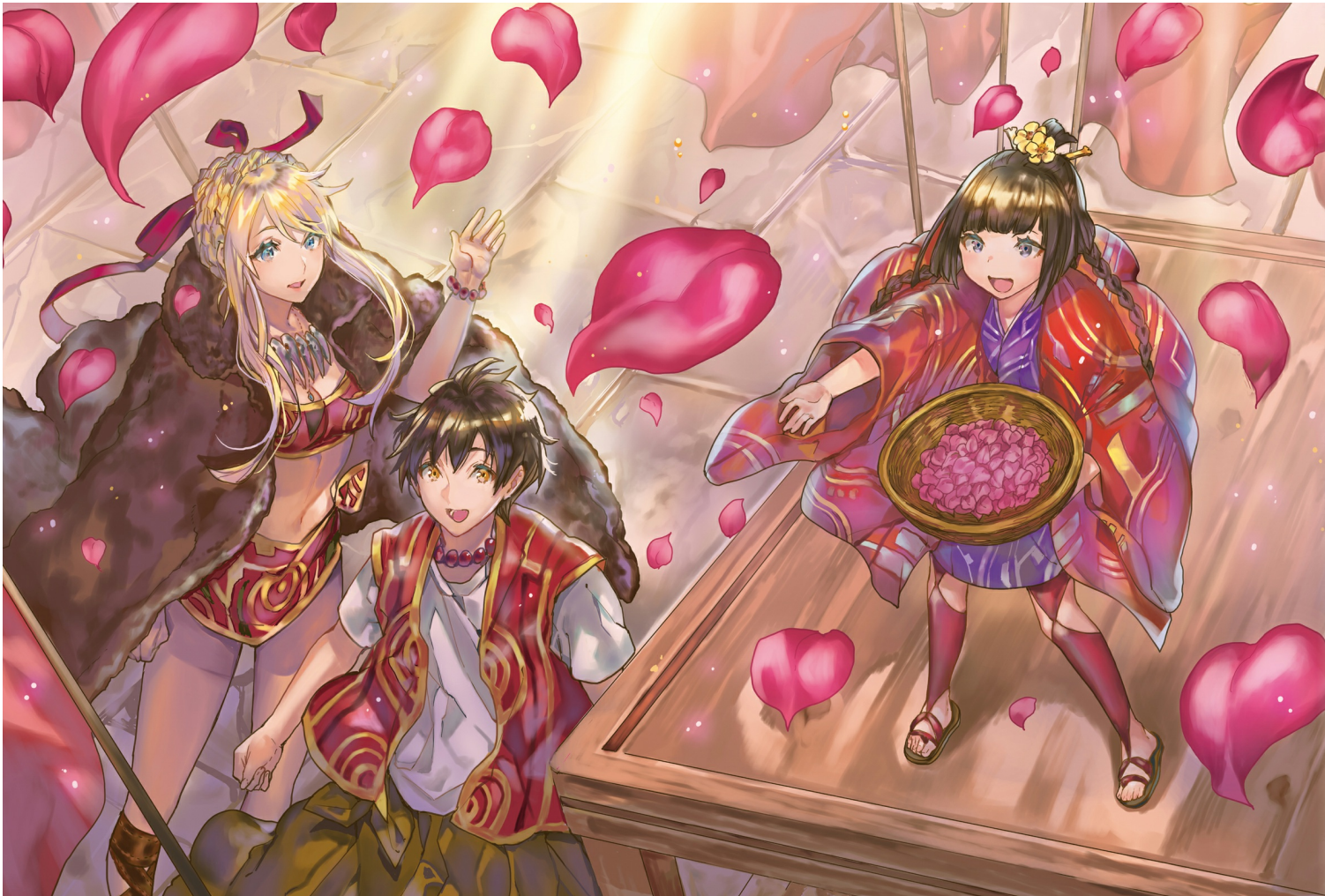








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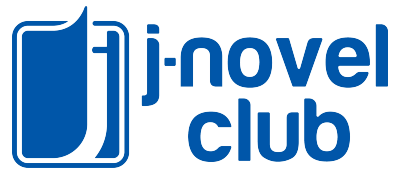
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 20

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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